

ESCAPE FROM TRADITION

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CHAPTER ONE

ON THE RECEIVING END

My parents were divorced when I was so young that I cannot remember my father living with us. I was brought up in a household of women – my mother, my elder sister, our nanny, my sister's governess and various domestic staff.

I remember only two men who were of any importance to me – our gardener, Ernest Dyer, and my elderly uncle, Hugh Seeböhm. Sometimes I would help them. I helped Ernest with bonfires and with building a wall. I helped Uncle Hugh with repairs to a fence which he worked on during his annual visits. While we were working they would chat with me without condescension.

I had toy soldiers, but I also had a sewing-box. I loved pretending, for instance in a gipsy caravan made of chairs, and I loved the acting games we sometimes played in the drawing-room when we were allowed down after tea – dumb crambo and charades.

I learnt to read and write. I have a vague memory of a book for beginner readers in large type with a picture at the top of the page, a brief text, and a list of new words at the bottom. My memory then jumps to a thick book about Robin Hood, that is still on my sister Jane's bookshelf. On the first few pages there are pencil dots indicating how far I had read each day - just a few lines. And then suddenly there are no more dots because I had understood how reading worked and I read the rest of the book to myself.

I have no recollection of being taught to write, although I remember having to do exercises to improve my writing. The only one I enjoyed was a row of cccs which

you turned upside down and then turned into a row of fat ssss by doing an interlocking row of cccs above them.

Jane used to write stories for her own enjoyment and I imitated her. Sometimes we used to amuse ourselves by doing exercises from a blue, cloth-covered school-book, called *A Practical English Course*, by Lawrence Oliphant¹. It was divided into lessons. Each lesson began with a passage followed by some comprehension questions, and then a series of grammar, vocabulary, punctuation and spelling exercises. We picked out the tasks that amused us, and particularly enjoyed the last part of each lesson, which suggested topics for imaginative writing. I expect this book was also used more formally in actual lessons with our governess, but I only remember dabbling in it for pleasure, without supervision.

My introduction to French was through a book called 'French without Tears', by Florence Bell. The title indicates that at one time tears used to be a normal part of French lessons. I remember the kind of illustration and the type-face and the general look of the page and the word 'canif', but I don't think I got beyond lesson three.

I was brought up as a Christian, saying my prayers every evening as a child, being taken to church on Sundays and singing carols at Christmas. When I was eight or nine I was given a copy of the Bible, and so I began to read it, as I read all the other books I was given. (I gave up at the Book of Numbers.)

Serious school boredom of course came later, but I remember being bored in church, before I ever went to school. I used to enjoy the hymns and sometimes the lessons, but the psalms and the prayers and the sermons were almost unbearable. 'Shshsh,' Jane and I were told. 'Sit still.' And I would look at the stained glass windows and examine the back of the pew in front of me and swing my legs and look round at the other people in the church, and 'Shshshsh! Sit still.'

I read poetry for pleasure, and I still remember snatches of what I read then. 'Who has seen the wind? Neither you nor I.' 'Hamelin town's in Brunswick, by famous Hanover city.' 'Three jolly farmers once bet a pound.' "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves.' 'Oh fat, white woman, who nobody loves.' 'There was an old man with a beard.' Jane used to chant verses from 'How Horatius kept the bridge' and parts of Hiawatha, so I learnt them too. And of course I knew many nursery rhymes and songs.

For a term or two I was sent to the little day school where Jane went. There were three eight-year-old boys and perhaps twenty girls up to the age of fourteen. We did country dancing and practised marching and I played the part of Mustardseed in an

¹ All books mentioned in the text are listed in the bibliography

extract from *Midsummer Night's Dream*. I was introduced to 'La Vie de Madame Souris', by G. Gladstone Solomon, and I spent a couple of terms on the first page.

Madame Souris a une maison.

La maison de Madame Souris est petite.

La maison de Madame Souris a une porte.

La maison de Madame Souris a quatre fenêtres.

Une, deux, trois, quatre.

La maison de Madame Souris a un jardin.

Dans le jardin de Madame Souris il y a quatre fleurs.

Une, deux, trois, quatre.

I quote from memory, so I may have missed some of the finer details. I simply can't see how we can have spent so long on this and the corresponding page of illustration.

There were occasional recitations and performances by the older girls, and I was enthralled by the scene where Hamlet summons his father's ghost, and a recitation of *The Listeners* by Walter de la Mare.

I only remember one aspect of the school that I found almost unbearable. That was homework, when the world outside the room where I was working was calling me to go out and play. The chair I was sitting in used to become peculiarly hard and sticky, and occupy most of the attention that was not caught by the sunlight from outside the window. I found it extraordinarily difficult to write or learn anything at all.

Every day I walked up to the school through a wood with Jane and two of her friends. Most of the time I was happy. And then, a month before my ninth birthday I was sent to Connaught House, a boarding school for boys.

My mother, as I learnt later, had not wanted to send me to a boarding school so young, but the social pressure was too strong for her. Little boys of our class were sent to boarding schools. She hated seeing me off on the school train as much as I hated going. After the train had gone, she told me, there would be many weeping mothers left on the platform.

For those of us on the train, even when we were eight years old, it was considered weedy to be homesick. If you couldn't help crying, it was best to hide, or to wait until after lights out in the dormitory.

The distress used to set in three or four days before the beginning of each term. It became pointless to start reading a new book, or to make any plans for the future. All I could do was hang about and wait.

It seems extraordinary that parents at that time can have imposed such misery on themselves and on their own children, but it was considered to be inevitable. Middle-class parents were obliged to sacrifice their own boys on the altar of the prep-school so as to make sure that they were properly prepared for an after-life in a public school. As a reward their boys were to be transformed into something wonderful – respectable conformists with the right accent who could play football and cricket and knew a few words of Latin. What is even more extraordinary is that it is still happening today.

When I was telling my daughter about my plans for this book, I found myself using the phrase 'unnecessary suffering', and so powerful was my indoctrination sixty years ago that I immediately felt that 'suffering' was too strong a word. On reflection I realised that I was wrong to regret my choice of word. My so-called privileged education entailed plenty of suffering.

I remember homesickness as a physical sensation. People talk of a 'sinking feeling' when something seems to be going wrong. Homesickness is a sinking feeling that lasts for days on end. When you are eight years old, the three months of a school term seem like eternity. Being sent back to school was like being condemned to death.

The feeling did not last, but it would keep returning. It was worst at the beginnings of terms and after half-term breaks, but it might come back at any time, particularly at night.

Nick Duffell, a psychotherapist, has worked for more than ten years with what he calls 'boarding school survivors' and has written a book about their experiences called *The Making of Them*. It shows that my distress was comparatively minor.

When I arrived at Connaught House I was bewildered. Bewilderment is one of the techniques used in wartime to extract information from prisoners. When you have no idea what to expect, when you do not know what is true and what is invention, you lose your sense of identity and become malleable. It was worst at the very beginning, of course, but what I learnt from that bewilderment has lasted all my life.

When you are eight years old, surrounded by noisy boys, almost all older than you, doing things you do not understand, the safest thing to do is to imitate them. When a bell rings and everyone goes indoors, you follow them. When there is silence for grace before meals, you keep quiet. When all the others take off their boots after football and get into a shallow trough of warm water to wash the mud off their

knees, you do the same. When they snap their ties at each other's bare legs, or roll up their handkerchiefs into hard little coshes and bash each other, you practise the same skills.

There was a frightful game we used to play on Sunday evenings, when one of the big classrooms was always cleared of desks. For some reason we all had to wait in there together for a while. The floors was of slippery polished wood, and we all wore leather-soled shoes, so most of the boys enjoyed running and sliding as if they were on ice. The game consisted of trying to knock people down by sliding into them from the side, and sweeping their feet out from under them. I never even learnt the skill of running and sliding, so I spent most of my time cowering against the wall, and I usually fell over if somebody slid into me there.

At the end of lunch in the dining room one day just before one of my first half-terms Mr. Hoyle, the headmaster, checked up that proper arrangements had been made for everybody. The school was silent as he called out the names of the few about whom he was still uncertain, and they gave their answers. Then he came to me. I was frightened at speaking in front of the whole school, but I said, truthfully, 'I'm going to stay with the Misses Bolitho.' Everyone roared with laughter. I still don't know why.

We accepted everything that happened to us, because that was the way things were, and we couldn't imagine any alternative. Another instructive incident during my early days occurred when we were playing a battle game in the gardens, with two armies. I was caught behind a lilac bush by a big boy called Barratt, who had a reputation for being rough, and I cried. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but this is how it's got to be.' I found this remark strangely reassuring.

We put up with the food. Lunches were good, considering it was war-time, but twice a week we had a cooked tea. One time it would be baked beans, and the other time Hitler's tummy. The staff called Hitler's tummy 'savoury rice', but everyone hated it and I was once made to sit over a plate of it until I managed to sick some of it up. I still hate baked beans.

We put up with treading silage. Silage was a novelty at the time. At Connaught House there was a wooden tower, probably not more than six or seven feet high, though it seemed huge at the time. All the mown grass was tipped into it, and then, once a week or so, the boys would be dropped into the tower to tread it all down. Mr. Hoyle stood on some steps and picked us up by one arm and dropped us down inside. You couldn't get out and it stank.

As soon as anything became routine it stopped being bewildering. Why did we all have to dress exactly the same? Why did Mr. Chadwick put his hand down inside some people's beds when he was doing lights out? Why was the headmaster's

sitting-room so nice and comfortable when our rooms only had desks in them? Such questions did not bother us.

I was no good at games. At cricket I was always at the end of the batting order and I used to field at long stop. When we played soccer no one ever passed the ball to me. The only sport I was able to join in with was rugger, because as a forward you had a role to play in the scrum whether you could run and kick or not. I was clumsy with my hands, so when there was a craze for making model aeroplanes or balsa-wood warships my efforts stood out as inadequate. In the Scout troop my patrol was the only one to have no one in it who had won a single badge. My mother kept my letters from school and after she died I looked through them before destroying them. I came across a paragraph about the fact that no one had spoken to me on the school train all the way from Paddington to Taunton – in those days a journey of three or four hours.

My status, then, was low. However, I enjoyed playing cards, Monopoly, Stockbroker, horse-racing games, chess and draughts, and I had one real social asset which was my ability to make up stories. In some dormitories we would have an illegal rota to decide who was to tell the story to lull us to sleep after lights-out, and my turn was always a popular one.

When I was at school caning was still the usual punishment. At Connaught House there were two positions for caning. The first time I was caned I had to stand up close to the end of one of the long school dining-tables. I was nine years old, so it was about waist-height. I had to bend over the table, resting my face on the polished wood and holding on to either side with my hands. As far as I remember I got three strokes of the cane, and they hurt more than anything that I could remember. This was in spite of the fact that they were deliberately restrained; they did not break my skin or even leave a bruise.

You had to assume the second position for a caning if you were caught talking in your dormitory. This meant bending over the end of your bed. It was worse than the table for two reasons – firstly you were only wearing pyjamas, instead of pants and flannel shorts, and secondly you had to bend your top half down over the bed-rail, so your bottom was tauter and more exposed.

When I had first arrived at the school there was a less fortunate boy in the class above me, nine or ten years old, who was always in trouble and was beaten more than once a week. I didn't know what his crimes were, but only saw him as an unpopular, ugly boy with a furtive manner. The story in the school was that the headmaster had broken a cane on him. All this beating failed to improve his behaviour, and he was eventually expelled. At the time I was too busy learning to fit

into the school to bother about cruelty to one of my fellows, but I have remembered it all my life.

What was extraordinary about my own beatings was that I was extremely well-intentioned and never wanted to be any trouble to anyone. I had never been punished at home, as far as I can remember, in spite of occasional tantrums and occasions when I resisted physically to being taken upstairs when it was time to have my bath. Punishment had simply not been part of my life, and without punishment I had generally behaved very well.

You can appear foolish if you don't understand local customs. Early in my days at Connaught House, when we were supposed to be marking each other's answers to a spelling test, I corrected the spellings I was supposed to be checking and put ticks by every answer. This was discovered, Mr. Hoyle, the headmaster was called in and I was accused of having been dishonest. I was nine years old at the time, and of course I hadn't meant to be dishonest, I had meant to help my friend, but this was not taken into account.

And you can appear foolish if you are too keen in your efforts to help. One day when some of the domestic staff were ill we had to carry piles of plates into the dining room. I tried to carry too many, and dropped them onto the slate floor of the pantry. There were then not enough plates to go round. Mr. Hoyle made an announcement about it to the whole school. I was very distressed but I tried to smile to show I didn't care. He saw my attempt at a smile and attacked me for that too.

Incidents like these inspired an awe of authority that I absorbed without thought or any sense of proportion. The maths room was heated by a metal stove, and you could roast chestnuts by balancing them on top of the door when it was shut. My desk was next to this stove, and I was roasting chestnuts quietly during a lesson when my bare knee touched the door. I did not cry out, but I sat and watched the skin go yellow, crinkle and shrink. Sitting quietly in the classroom was more important than first aid.

I was of course frightened of the teachers and the bigger boys, but that was not all. I was also frightened of my contemporaries. It was terribly important not to be an outsider. Even trifles could be dangerous. My games sweater was a slightly different pattern to everyone else's, and my mother's regular holiday washing kept it gleaming white. Everyone else's tended towards a respectable earthy colour. The teachers didn't mind, but I did. I was different enough anyway, without having a special variation of uniform.

We lived together all day, and we slept in dormitories. There was no escape from the constant pressure to conform. Every inadequacy was exposed to public comment. We did not see the resultant mockery and ostracism as bullying, we

accepted it as a natural consequence. The staff sometimes set the example. Mr. Hoyle, who of course spoke English with an upper-class accent, always made fun of a boy who pronounced 'one' as 'wonn' instead of 'wunn.'

It was not only the values upheld by the staff that became ingrained, it was also the values of the subculture. The staff preached obedience, and there was a rule that you must not speak in the dormitories after lights out. All the boys talked after lights out. If there was anyone who didn't talk because he wanted to obey the rule he was regarded as a goody-goody and a coward. If the staff caught you talking, they beat you, and that was that. It was not taken particularly seriously by either party.

The concept of goody-goodness as something to be avoided at all costs overrode most other moral considerations for most of the boys. This did not mean that they had to spend their time breaking rules, but that if there was a rule most people broke, you must break it too, if there was a teacher who could not keep order in his class, you must contribute to the chaos, if a boy was unpopular you must shun him. I was for a long time a goody-goody in all respects except for talking after lights out. I accepted the demands of the adults, but I resisted the pressure from my contemporaries.

We had to wear the school uniform, of course, including shorts all the year round. (I was an exception. After I got pneumonia and nearly died I was allowed to wear long trousers in the winter.) Clean clothes were handed out once a week. Every evening we had to fold our clothes neatly and put them on the chairs beside our beds. They were checked at lights out. Before breakfast we stood in a queue to be inspected for cleanliness. We would have to hold out our hands palms upwards and then turn them over to show the nails; if we didn't do it properly the matron would turn them over for us. Then she looked behind our ears. Palms, fingernails and behind the ears were apparently key areas for hygiene. After breakfast we all had to go to the lavatory and then report to the matron as to whether we had moved our bowels. Every other evening each dormitory of four to six boys would share the same bath-water. (There was one dormitory captain who required every boy in his dormitory to pee in the bath and then drink some of the water, but this custom did not spread.)

In spite of all this Connaught House was, by comparison with many other prep-schools, a gentle and friendly place.

In this comparatively gentle and friendly place we also suffered from frequent boredom. Boredom sounds like a pretty minor form of suffering. 'I'm bored,' people say, when they can't think of anything they want to do. School boredom, though, classroom boredom, homework boredom, is in a different category.

When I arrived at Connaught House I had to start again on Madame Souris.

Madame Souris a une maison.

La maison de Madame Souris est petite.

La maison de Madame Souris a une porte.

La maison de Madame Souris a quatre fenêtres.

Une, deux, trois, quatre.

You may remember it too, by now. In the whole of the first year we never got beyond page 4.

We started on Latin. At the age of eight, this meant learning the following:

| | | |
|------|--------|--------------------------|
| Nom. | mensa | a table |
| Voc. | mensa | o table |
| Acc. | mensam | a table |
| Gen. | mensae | of a table |
| Dat. | mensae | at or to a table |
| Abl. | mensa | by, with or from a table |

It seemed completely nonsensical, and not surprisingly it took us weeks to learn it. When we had learnt it, we knew it for ever.

One day when we had made rather more progress a friend and I practised speaking to each other in Latin. Our subject-matter was limited. 'Sum puer. Rex amat reginam. Ego magistrum non amo.' (I am a boy. The king loves the queen. I don't like the teacher.) Nevertheless it was a good deal more interesting than learning the declension of nouns, and I see now that encouraging us to speak would have been a far better way of teaching us.

We read *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar* in English lessons when we were ten or eleven. There was no attempt to help us to understand what we were reading. I remember the teacher complaining about the way we read 'o' as if it was 'oh'. If we couldn't say it properly it would be better just to say 'of'. I don't think it had occurred to any of us that it meant 'of'.

'The quality of mercy is not strained,' we had to learn by heart. The irony of it only strikes me now. If only our teacher had been merciful.

The first line was self-evidently nonsense. I could not make any connection between the abstract idea of mercy and the concrete vision of a kitchen strainer. I

understood the next line and a bit, 'It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath,' but otherwise it might as well have been in a foreign language. It is dismal work learning words that mean nothing to you; you gain nothing from it and you blame the author of the words for your suffering. It is astonishing that so many people who loathed Shakespeare at school come to love his plays as adults.

School boredom is a kind of imprisonment. You are imprisoned in school anyway, but boredom in lessons puts you in a cell within a cell. It is not just that you have to be there, that you have to sit quietly, that you get punished if you talk or fidget or pass notes. Even your mind is invaded. Think about this, you are told. Don't dare look out of the window. Copy this out. Answer these questions. Learn this by heart. *La maison de Madame Souris a quatre fenêtres.*

There were times when I was willing and interested, or even enthusiastic, but there were also hours and hours of emptiness. We had to sit for whole lessons while other people answered questions and made mistakes. We had to do futile exercises.

For a geography prep, for instance, we had to find the longitude and latitude of various capital cities. I was the only one who looked them up in the back of the atlas. Everyone else tried to work them out from the maps. I was afraid I had been cheating, but when the time came for our work to be returned, I was congratulated and the all the rest had to do the work again, using the index at the back. Because I had done so well, I was told to work out the distance between the cities from their longitude and latitude. I gave the answers in degrees, and was told that I should have multiplied them by 69 to get the distance in miles. It is only at our latitude that a degree of latitude corresponds roughly to 69 miles, so the whole exercise was nonsense, but it *kept me occupied* while the others were doing the work I had already done. Keeping children occupied is a teacherly obsession, and it means keeping them occupied with activities that keep them quiet, not activities that excite or interest them.

If teachers cannot interest children, the only ways of controlling them are by bribery or fear. Bribery only featured occasionally, in end of term prizes and other rewards for good work, but fear was a constant. We were afraid of being beaten, but that was not the fundamental fear. We were afraid of wrath, afraid of mockery, afraid of making fools of ourselves, afraid of dropping a few places in the weekly form order or even coming bottom, afraid of being made to attempt something in public that we could not do, afraid of being shown up as somehow different.

Adults fear these things too, but on the whole they manage to avoid them. For children in school they are a part of everyday experience.

Joy was rare at Connaught House. Delight was rare. Even contentment was rare – its place was taken by resignation. But there were times of enjoyment and pleasure.

I enjoyed Sunday evenings, when we were invited into the Hoyles' drawing-room and Mr. or Mrs. Hoyle read to us. I enjoyed the compulsory rest on a half-holiday afternoon, when we read to ourselves. This was particularly good on warm, dry days in the summer, when we took our rugs out onto the grass and lay out in the sun. I liked the dingle, where we dug camps out of the steep sides, and sometimes even succeeded in roofing them over. I enjoyed the films on Saturday evenings – silent, black and white films of Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and the like. I enjoyed the occasional entertainers or lecturers; I remember a man who sang 'The flowers that bloom in the spring, tra-la,' another who dressed himself up in a complete diving suit and a third who stuck his head through a curtain dangling the body of a puppet that he worked with his hands.

Once or twice a term there was an outing for the people who had done best in lessons. In the summer we would be taken off into the Quantock Hills where we played games in the bracken and ate food cooked on a camp fire.

Mrs. Hoyle played the organ when we had prayers, and I liked it so much that I wanted to learn to play it myself. (I was never allowed to touch it.)

There was a wonderful game called Flags, for which the whole school was divided into two groups. Each group was given four flags to stick into the ground at their base, which would be far away in some copse on the edge of the school estate. Every player had a life, which was a piece of string tucked into his belt behind him, and if an opponent took his life he had to go all the way back to his base to get a new one. The object of the game was to capture the other team's flags. The estate reached far beyond the actual school grounds, and the game would take all afternoon. It involved a lot of creeping and strategy as well as chasing and fighting, and I loved it.

On the last day of the winter terms we were divided into groups to make up plays. We spent the whole day rehearsing and performed in the evening. I was particularly proud of a special effect in a play in which a fortune-teller's crystal ball was smashed. The crystal ball was a large glass door-stop, and the smashing sound was made by throwing gravel on the floor.

I enjoyed a few of my lessons, I believe, but I can't remember any particular moments of pleasure in the classroom. We laughed when we were told that someone had written, 'The men were mustard for the battle.' We laughed about the pencil that had been handed in which, according to the writing on the side, belonged to Bill Bloges. (The poor owner, who did not wish to own up to the spelling mistake which had caused such mirth, never claimed it.) We laughed about the boy who suggested, in a general knowledge quiz, that two German makes of car were Mercedes Benz and Rolls Benz.

I also know that I liked maths and I won several prizes for it, but all I remember of the lessons is being commended for working out that the number that came before x when you were counting was $x - 1$, being mocked for thinking that addition sums involving s and d were algebraic, when in fact they were about shillings and pence, and burning my knee.

I enjoyed board games and card games.

And I enjoyed telling stories after lights out.

And that's about it, as far as pleasure is concerned, although I must add that there were two so-called punishments that were more like rewards. One was working in the school grounds with Mr. Hoyle, the headmaster, who would organise us and work with us. Our misdemeanours had been noticed, and in consequence we were given the chance to work beside the headmaster for the good of the school and to a small extent to make friends with him. The atmosphere was so purposeful and friendly that occasionally boys who were not being punished would join in.

The other punishment, also organised by Mr. Hoyle, was known as a tea-party. If you failed in your Latin grammar test on a Wednesday morning you had to spend part of the afternoon, which was a half-holiday, revising the work you had failed to learn. There would only be three or four boys present, we would all get personal attention and encouragement, and by the end of the afternoon we knew we had caught up with the rest of the class.

Can an activity that you enjoy really be described as a punishment? And what about an activity from which you gain a clear benefit? They don't seem like punishments to me. And yet the activities I have just described achieved exactly the results that punishment was supposed to achieve – willingness to co-operate and an interest in learning. The best that conventional punishment could achieve was reluctant obedience.

One of my strongest personal experiences in relation to punishment was an occasion when I expected to be punished and was in fact forgiven. It happened on the last evening of one of my last terms. There was a thermometer on the wall in our dormitory, and one of us had a box of matches. We wanted to see the red line grow, so we took the thermometer down and heated the bulb with a match. To our delight, the red line sped upwards. What would happen when it reached the end, we wondered. Two things happened – the glass broke, and Mr. Hoyle came in. We showed him the thermometer, and confessed our crime, fully expecting to be severely punished. To our astonishment he told us that we had been conducting a sensible scientific experiment from which we had learnt something valuable. This was of course true, but we had been expecting quite a different line – that we had damaged school property and must therefore be punished.

By the end of my five years at the school I had learnt enough to pass the Common Entrance exam, and I had discovered a new social skill – I could make people laugh. It was not a gift that added to my self-confidence, though, because the way I made them laugh was by saying exactly what I thought. I went on doing it because I could pretend I was making them laugh on purpose, and it gave me some kind of kudos.

I had finally grown used to the strange world of the prep-school, and even felt quite at home after a few days into a new term. Then I had to leave it all and go on to Eton.

CHAPTER 2

STILL ON THE RECEIVING END

On my first day at Eton I thought our head of games was a master, so I called him 'sir.' When I was told that the cupboard fixed to the wall in my room was a sock cupboard, I put my socks in it, because I did not know that 'sock' was Eton slang for food. I had to learn to say 'tutor' for housemaster', 'dame' for 'matron' and 'half' instead of 'term'. I learnt how to tie the peculiar diminished bow-tie that went with my tail coat and pinstripe trousers that were the school uniform. I learnt that the house prefects were called 'the Library', after their private common-room.

I didn't wear braces, because my trousers kept up without them, and when we were changing in the gym one day I saw I was unique. Someone tried to pull my trousers down, and even though he didn't succeed I took to wearing braces. At the beginning of my first term I took my stamp collection with me, but I never had time to do anything with it.

After two or three weeks new boys were subjected to a new boys' test, in which we had to answer questions about such things as school slang, land-marks and the significance of the various house and school colours. I was not interested and I simply could not learn them. I was given a second and a third chance. I was threatened with a beating if I did not pass, yet I still could not learn them. In the end the Library just gave up trying and let me off.

There was a craze for puppy-fighting among the new boys. This was called ragging. When the Library objected one of us said that we had seen them ragging so we thought it was allowed. To our surprise we were let off; of course we had known it wouldn't be allowed, and that the Library could bash each other with cushions and rolled-up magazines and turn their whole room into chaos as often as they felt like it and that afterwards we would have to clear up the mess.

We accepted fagging without question. Every senior boy had at least one of us appointed as his fag, who had to tidy his room, put away his games clothes, polish his kit for the CCF (the Combined Cadet Corps) and cook his tea. There was a particularly unpleasant tradition called a boy-call. Anyone in the Library could call for a fag at any time. He would stand in the corridor and roar, with extraordinary force, 'Boy-oy-oy-oy-oy-oy!' The cry would start low, rise up higher and louder and then drop down and fade away. It lasted as long as the caller's breath held out, and you could hear the calls from the houses across the street. If it was in your house and you were in the lower school you had to drop whatever you were doing and run to the caller. Whoever arrived last was given a job – perhaps taking a message to

someone in another house, tidying up some mess or fetching something the caller had left behind in some other part of the school.

Once we knew what was expected of us we were no longer bewildered, we felt relieved that we understood the system and we accepted it. Fagging doesn't happen any more, because even our traditional public schools have seen how unreasonable it is, but when I was at school it was part of the culture.

I learnt the importance of conforming. You should never put yourself forward until you are absolutely certain about what other people are expecting. Don't volunteer, don't comment, don't step out of line and always sit at the back of the class if you can. All my adult life I have been trying to unlearn this lesson.

The boys had two types of behaviour, one with the staff and one with each other. When I first arrived I was shocked by the swearing, although by modern standards it was mild. Swearing did not happen within earshot of the masters. During a play-reading with my tutor one of my friends was faced with the line, 'Well, I'll be d—d.' After an embarrassed pause he read out, 'Well, I'll be dooed.' We all laughed, including my tutor, and my friend was offended and asked us what else he could have said.

The two kinds of behaviour reached far more deeply than control of language. Talking to the staff formally in lessons entailed a deference that soon became automatic, and talking to the staff supposedly informally, at meals or in occasional casual encounters, involved an unnatural politeness, an artificial making of conversation that precluded any real intimacy. I remember the only occasion I had any sense of my tutor as a human being, when he was feeling relaxed and contented after a Sunday afternoon in the garden with his family. He told me he had had 'a typically suburban afternoon,' and momentarily I felt fond of him.

I hated the way unsuccessful teachers were victimised, but a cousin who was at school with me explained that it didn't matter, because teachers aren't really human. There is a distorted truth in this; teachers have to play a role, and that role is not a human one. It is only when they drop their role that they become real.

Caning took a particular form at Eton. It was known as 'beating up', which alarmed me a great deal when I first heard the phrase. We were never beaten up by a teacher, but we were beaten up by the head of our house. You would be warned of a coming beating-up by being told not to undress after prayers. ('Prayers' was a brief service in the boarding-house immediately before the lower-school bed-time.) When you were eventually summoned to the Library you would find that the centre of the room had been cleared. The head of the house would be standing there, cane in hand, beside an ordinary dining-room chair. The other prefects would be sitting round the walls in armchairs, holding books or magazines and pretending to read.

The first time I was beaten there I bent over the back of the chair and held on to the seat. This was not correct. The head of the house had to tell me to hold on to the rungs below the seat. I still remember the swish of the cane and the difficulty of not crying out at the sharpness of the pain.

After you were beaten you had to say thank you, but this was made easier by being given permission to go. You could retain a vestige of dignity if you were only thanking for this permission, not for the beating itself. The routine dialogue went: "You may go." "Thank you." The trouble was that it was hard to speak at all without sobbing.

We accepted this routine without question, and bragged that we would rather be beaten and get it over with than sit for hours writing lines. It was understood that when we were older we would be entitled to beat our juniors, which was thought of as something to look forward to.

I cannot remember the reasons for any of my beatings at Connaught House, but I do remember the reason for one of my beatings at Eton. It was because I had left a football behind on a football field, and I was beaten even though the next day I was able to go and fetch the ball back. This pretext seems so trivial that I think there must have been more behind it; it was probably intended to make me try harder to fit in, to sharpen up, to accept authority. If so it failed in all these objectives; I came to pride myself on being different. I was often frightened, but I did not want to become like the people who frightened me.

One of the rules in my house concerned a large table called 'the slab', which was near the boys' entrance. When we came back to the house for meals we would throw our books on the slab and go straight on into the dining-room. If members of the Library found any of your books downstairs on the slab after prayers they brought them up to your room and fined you twopence per book. If your total fines for the term came to two shillings, you were beaten. A beating was a severe punishment; nevertheless, boy after boy would leave too many books on the slab on too many occasions, suffer the beating and then continue in the same way. In spite of the severity of the punishment and the triviality of the offence, the system simply did not work.

Of course beating is an extreme form of punishment, but lines and detentions serve no better purpose. The only time I was given lines as a punishment was when a science master who had little control over his classes set me to write out a chapter from our text book because I distracted his attention during an experiment by passing a note to someone. The punishment itself encouraged me to a tiny act of rebellion – I wrote out as little of the chapter as I dared, making sure only of the first and last lines of each paragraph.

I had one experience that echoed the incident of the broken thermometer at Connaught House. I owed several weeks' pocket-money for fines, and had been told that they must be paid by Saturday evening. I had saved up enough, but earlier that day the whole house was taken in a coach to watch the school eight rowing at Henley. The rowing was boring, but there was also a funfair, and at the funfair I spent all my carefully saved money. The head of the house called me to the Library to pay my fine, and I told him what had happened. He said that was all right, and I could go. He had to tell me twice before I believed him.

This was stranger than the case of the broken thermometer. There was no justification for my splashing out my entire savings. According to the system I should certainly have suffered. Yet I remember this occasion more vividly than any of my canings; I can remember the room and the name and the face of the head of house (he was called Eustace - that was his surname) and the fact that he was standing in the middle of the room and there was no one else present. And I remember a huge feeling of relief and gratitude and good will. There was, after all, humanity in the house as well as a system. I had scorned to co-operate with the system, but it seemed to make sense to want to co-operate with people.

The thermometer incident had had the same effect. We expected a traditional, violent response to something we had done by mistake, but the headmaster listened to our story and trusted us. Instead of feeling humiliated and resentful, we felt appreciated and respected. The spending of the fines money, though, did not result in any discussion. I told my story and it was accepted and that was that. I had not even thought that I was offering an excuse, because what I had done seemed inexcusable. Eustace did not explain why he was not punishing me, he just sent me away. He may well only have let me go because he didn't feel like giving a caning, but it was far more effective than a caning would have been.

When you consider that most British adults have spent at least eleven years at school, and some have been educated at school for thirteen years and then at university for another three, it is extraordinary how few occasions any of us can remember when we were actually taught anything. We can remember a certain amount of what we were taught, but particular moments of instruction seem to disappear from our memories.

A good deal research about learning is done from an outsider's perspective. People who are no longer at school invent tests and create statistical tables and analyse results, but they don't usually listen to what the learners themselves have to say and they don't value their own memories as a resource. And it is not only their memories that they ignore - they do not even analyse their current experience of learning through research.

I have been trying for a long time to remember occasions when I was actually taught something. From Eton I have only been able to recall two clear scenes of classroom instruction and one incident in a biology class. In my first term I was in a class taught by Gad Tait, so-called because his initials were G.A.D. He used to teach us poetry by making us chant it, one line at a time, while he bounced about the room, chanting with us and emphasising the rhythm as if every poem was a march. I remember mostly isolated bits of Tennyson.

Twó, two ónly remáin (pause) of the dárk-eyed sóns of Acháea.
Cástor fléet in the cár, (pause) Polydéukes bráve with the céstus.

Knówn to me wéll are the fáces of áll, (pause) their námes I reméber.

It occurs to me only now, as I mark the pauses, that although Tennyson had been imitating Latin hexameters, by leaving a pause after the first three or four beats and then again at the end of the line, Gad Tait was leading us to chant two four-beat sections instead of one long six-beat line.

Push óff, and sítting wéll in órder stríke the sóunding fúrrows,

we chanted, and we also learnt a poem by Housman:-

Úp lad! Théws that líe and cúmber
Súnlit pállets néver thríve.
Sóomething sóomething sóomething slúmber
Wére not méant for mán álíve.

I remember, perhaps inaccurately, that he told us that 'thews' means 'thighs'. I found out recently that it actually means 'custom: trait: manner: moral quality: bodily quality, muscle or strength'. More recently, when I was taking part in a reading of *Lady Windermere's Fan* at another school, I heard the teacher in charge replying to a student who asked what "bimetallist" meant. "Bisexual," she said, unhesitatingly. Some teachers apparently think it better to give wrong information than to admit that you don't know.

Apart from the lines we chanted with Mr. Tait, the only poem I can remember from school is 'Mysterious night, when our first parent knew,' which I hated, because we had to learn it by heart, line by line, and it took a long time to understand the second line, 'Thee from report divine, and heard thy name.' You had

to go back to the first line and distort the rhythm to get 'When our first parent knew thee,' and when you read it so that it made sense, you lost the rhyme in line four, 'This glorious canopy of light and blue.' Another boy in my class kindly marked out the rhyme scheme for me in my book in heavy pencil, which annoyed me not only because it messed up the book but also because I knew it all anyway.

English was not actually on the timetable for most of us at Eton. The time we spent on English was taken from classics lessons in the lower school, and from our specialist lessons afterwards. I was in Van Oss's class for French when I was seventeen, and for one glorious lesson he gave us advice on writing good English.

He told us not to use the word 'very' and asked us to consider 'a brave man' and 'a very brave man,' and to see who seemed the braver. He drew our attention to the fact that a lake looks silver on a summer day, but black when it is surrounded by snow. I can't remember why he gave us this example, but I have remembered it. And he presumably gave us more good advice that I have used but since forgotten.

In a biology class taken by Wetty Morris, a fierce disciplinarian who had earned his nickname in earlier days of disorderly classes, I learnt something that was only coincidentally to do with the subject he was teaching. I felt sick, and I raised my hand for permission to speak. He paid no attention. I said, "Sir, I feel sick," and he paid no attention. I stood up and walked to the front of the class with my hand up and said, "Sir, I think I am going to be sick." He paid no attention. I bolted for the door and I was sick. He turned to the class and said, "That was a perfect example of reverse peristalsis."

He was then attentive to me, took me into another classroom to recover, gave me water to drink and sent me back to my house. I have never forgotten the meaning of peristalsis (although I had to look it up in the dictionary to find out how to spell it when I was writing this passage).

I remember plenty more about what teachers did, but I just don't remember them teaching me anything. Charley Rowlatt always had a drip on the end of his nose and at the beginning of every lesson required us to hold up a pencil, a pen and three Greek books, with an automatic punishment for each missing item. A. J. Marsden told us how inaccurate sten-guns were; he said he had stormed into a room full of enemy soldiers, sprayed bullets around and not hit any of them. Mr. Hope, a maths teacher, used to bicycle from Eton to Henley, maintaining as constant a speed as possible because if he slowed down going uphill or speeded up going downhill it had a disproportionate effect on his average speed. Mr. Howarth, one of our German teachers, took us to his room one day to play us a recording of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. His delight was infectious; if only he could have inspired a similar delight in the German that he was supposed to be teaching us.

The maths teachers at Eton were a hindrance rather than a help. They would explain some new idea to the whole class, writing on the blackboard and occasionally asking us questions, and then we would be set to do examples from our text-books. There was never any need to listen to the masters, because the text-books always put things much more clearly, and if we found we still could not understand we asked the people sitting next to us.

The greatest pleasure of my maths career was the weekly problem paper, which was given out as EW (Extra Work, the Etonian expression for homework) to the boys in the top maths set for each year. There would be ten questions, of which we would usually only be able to do four or five at most, but we used to spend hours over them. I remember with pride that I once finished eight problems, and that on another occasion I was the only person to solve a particular problem (constructing an equilateral triangle with an apex on each of three randomly placed parallel lines). My friend Stephen Plowden and I spent part of a week-end, long after we had left school, once again solving the problem which involved finding a sum of money that used the same digits in the same order when it was expressed in farthings as when it was expressed in pounds, shillings and pence. Problem papers were sets of puzzles, and I loved them.

I think I forgot more history than I learnt. At home I had read *The Nursery History of England*, and *The Little Duke*, and *He Went with Marco Polo*, and *The Carved Cartoon*, and parts of *Our Island Story*. At school I learnt that you got more marks for a long essay than a short one, so it paid to put 'Henry V, the ruling monarch of the country at that time', rather than just 'Henry V'. And I once got commended for a test on a chapter from a book of Roman history that I had only skipped through on the way to the classroom; other boys' answers, apparently, had been cluttered with irrelevant detail. I used to arrange my piano lessons during history, and missed whatever consecutive links there might have been. The only history I remember enjoying was when we did Elizabethan explorers, and we were given a real book, not a school-book, which we were able to read whenever we wanted.

Reading for pleasure was something I had no time for. Up until my teen-age years I had read a great deal, and had read many books several times. Then, for the rest of my school career, I read almost none. I was twice forced to enter for what was called the English Literature Prize. For one competition I had to read *Oliver Twist*, and for the other I had to read Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. I liked some of Poe's stories, but I was put off *Oliver Twist* for ever.

However, I did find time to write. I wrote stories, poems, songs, plays and even the first fifty pages or so of a novel. Most of this was never read by anyone. Occasionally a friend or a parent would read something, and we once acted one of my sketches in a house entertainment, but on the whole I wrote entirely for my own satisfaction, with the vague hope of one day having my work published. Very

occasionally we had to write for teachers, and I remember one man asking me whether I had read a lot of Virginia Woolf, because I seemed to model my style on hers. I had not read any, and did not appreciate the magnificence of the compliment. As a general rule my teachers had almost nothing to do with my writing, and their influence on my reading was entirely negative, except for one other remark made by Van Oss, the teacher who had talked about English style. He told us that no one should read Dickens before they were twenty-one. I wish the man who set *Oliver Twist* for the English Literature Prize had shared his opinion.

I did learn a little science, which was strange because it was hardly taught at Eton when I was there. We had, I think, one or two years in which we had a term each of physics, biology and chemistry, with three lessons a week. I remember two experiments that we did, a little about vitamins, one demonstration of the expansion of metal when heated and of course the meaning of peristalsis. At home, when I had been younger, I had enthusiastically read books about animals and birds and a series of *Lively Youngster* books, which presented scientific ideas with each page of text balanced by a page of illustrative cartoons. I was interested then, and now I am always interested when I come across a copy of *The New Scientist*, but school failed to nourish this interest.

One of my main interests all my life has been music. Eton failed me there too.

I had given up piano lessons three or four times by the time I left. I had a good ear and a good sense of rhythm, but piano lessons and piano practice were never more than a grind. There was a stubborn opinion, held by all my different piano teachers, that there was no point in giving me anything to work on that I could actually play, but I must always be obliged to try something that was too difficult for me. The only piece I ever learnt completely was Schumann's *The Merry Peasant*. Everything else I was set to learn was replaced before I could play anything but the easy bits. My final rejection of piano-teaching came when my current teacher tried to get me to learn the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata, which had twice as many sharps as anything I had ever attempted before. It is at least slow, but when I could play the first eight bars or so he set me to learn the second movement, which is lively, and when he got bored with my struggles he set me to learn the third, which is not only fast but very difficult indeed. I soon gave up and never had another lesson.

I had not learnt to play any pieces (apart from *The Merry Peasant*) but I had learnt how to figure out what written music meant, and I taught myself to flounder through little pieces by Walter Carroll and then in a music shop I found a book called *Beginners play Boogie*. I learnt to play parts of that absolutely correctly. But in spite of a lifetime in which I have seldom spent more than a few days without playing a piano, I still can't 'read' music, I can only figure it out slowly one note at a time.

I wanted to join the choir. I went to one rehearsal but I could not sing from written music and everyone else seemed able to, so I did not go back. At the top of the school you had three lessons a week in which you could actually choose your own subject, and for one term I chose music, but the other boys in the group were the best musicians in the school and I remember only humiliation. On one occasion we were asked to sing from an orchestral score - 'You are the first violins, you are the clarinets, you are the percussion' - and I was completely at a loss. The main lesson I learned about music was that I was not any good at it.

As I discovered later, this was not actually true, as much else that one learns in school is not true.

We had chapel every day of the week and twice on Sundays, as well as house prayers every evening. I was prepared for confirmation during the holidays by an extremely powerful figure called Kenneth Matthews, who at the time was vicar in a parish near where we lived. All this stayed with me for a long time.

The Ten Commandments did not mean much to me, but some of Christ's teaching seemed to me then, and still seems to me now, so extreme as to be perfect. Love thy neighbour as thyself, turn the other cheek, sell that thou hast and give the money to the poor. The less appealing aspects of his teaching - the outer darkness where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, the casting out of eyes and cutting off of hands - I somehow managed to ignore.

During one week in Lent there was an impressive series of talks given by a monk every evening. You could attend if you wanted to. The first evening the Chapel was half empty, but by the end of the week it was full. A joke is all I can remember now of what he told us. Two flies were running round and round the top of a cereal package. At last the second one caught up with the first and said, 'Why are we running round and round like this?' The front fly replied, 'Can't you read? It says "Tear along the dotted line."' Perhaps it encouraged my incipient resistance to blind conformity.

I resented two customs that seemed to me to encroach on what was my rightful free time. These were Sunday Questions and Extra Book. Sunday Questions meant writing an essay on some moral or biblical topic that was set on Saturday and collected on Monday. We also had to read a chapter from the bible as a preparation for Monday Questions, which had quick one- or two-word answers and were designed only to make sure that we had really read the prescribed chapter attentively. Extra Book offered a choice of books to be studied in your own time each term, for an exam at the end of it. This should have been an opportunity to follow up subjects that interested us, but unfortunately my tutor always insisted that I should do Latin, so I slaved through a large number of books of *The Aeneid*. I never got the drift of the story, and I barely know what it was about. There was only one Extra

Book that I actually enjoyed, which was when I was genuinely allowed to make my own choice of subject. I chose geography, because the book was about volcanoes. Geography was a subject, like English, that you were normally only allowed to study if you were a so-called kappa boy, considered too stupid to learn Greek.

School Certificate English we were expected to pass without having any lessons in it. We were had weekly group tutorials in our so-called 'free time', when our tutors occupied us with whatever took their fancy. I remember spending weeks and weeks failing to absorb information about Greek sculpture. Our minimal preparation for the exam took place in these tutorials. For English Literature we had to read the play about Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Sir Toby Belch. *Twelfth Night*. (I was not pretending – when I began this paragraph I really couldn't remember the name of the play, or Malvolio or Viola or Olivia or any of the other characters. I thought it might be *As You Like It*, but I knew what *As You Like It* was about, and I had to find a complete Shakespeare and go through the contents page). I knew it was a comedy because it said so at the beginning, but it never even made me smile when I was sixteen and we read it in our tutorials.

Languages, like music, were always pitched at too high a level. We had to work on Virgil's *Georgics*, endless poems in Latin giving advice on agriculture. Twice a week we would be given twenty lines or so to prepare for the next lesson. We were allowed to work together, and on one occasion two friends and I learnt from the notes at the back of the book that 'vere fabis satio' is an unusual grammatical construction, and means 'in spring sow beans.' We sang these two phrases over and over again. 'Vere fabis satio. Vere fabis satio. Vere fabis sati- vere fabis sati- vere fabis satio. In spring sow beans, in spring sow beans, in spring sow beans.' I don't know why the grammatical construction was interesting, but I can still remember the general outline of the tune. It is the only memory I have of Virgil's *Georgics*.

Latin verse as a system I found interesting, because I liked the rhythm of words, and I still know about spondees and dactyls and heroic couplets. The only use this knowledge has been to me, though, is to show me that people who try to analyse English prosody as if it were Latin are bound to meet difficulties. English verse depends on stresses, and not on metrical feet. Gad Tait's corruption of the hexameter form as attempted by Tennyson is an example of the kind of mistake that arises.

In the middle of one year, when I was fifteen, I was promoted into a higher set for Greek. Members of this set we were expected to write answers to questions on homework actually in the language. As I couldn't even understand the questions, I was completely lost. My friends tried to teach me the Greek for who, what, when, where and how but all the words seemed similar and I got into a mood of despair which prevented me from ever learning to distinguish them. Experience of the despair which prevents one from achieving things that one should be capable of

doing perfectly easily, was eventually to help me to become a more understanding teacher.

French and German were taught as if they were Latin. We translated laboriously into and out of the two languages and we learnt rules about word order and the conjugation of verbs. Modern languages, though, are easier than Latin, so we would have several pages of construe to prepare rather than a few lines.

We even had occasional lessons in which we were supposed to speak. There would be a big, detailed picture of some everyday scene, and we would be asked questions like 'Où est le pain?' and 'Que fait Jean?' With twenty or more in the class this would be extremely boring. The best you could hope for in a forty minute period was two minutes of activity.

There was an enthusiasm for teaching lists, sometimes driven into our heads by chanting. In German lessons I learnt 'The spirit of god and the body of man and the worm at the edge of the wood,' which is a list of the masculine nouns that take umlaut and -er in the plural, and 'durch, für, ohne, gegen, wider, um,' which is a list of prepositions taking the accusative, a handy list to run through in your head when you are trying to say something. In Latin I learnt 'The father, the mother, the brother, the young man, the old man, the prophet, the dog,' which I think are the nouns which take -um in the genitive plural instead of -orum, but I'm no longer sure. Even if I knew what the words had in common it would be of little use to me, but the list is in my head for ever.

After School Certificate I chose to specialise in modern languages and floundered through Salammbô and Andromaque, but when I first went to France at the age of eighteen for several days I did not even dare to say 'Bonjour', 'Merci', 'Oui ' or 'Non.'

I was fortunate in that I was good at most lessons, but I was unfortunate when it came to sport because I was always very tall and lanky for my age, awkward and weak, and I had a bad eye for a ball. I learnt a lot from being always, as it were, bottom of the class in sport. Luckily there were no marks or form orders for PE, but the almost daily humiliation was a lesson in itself.

When everyone else was doing press-ups in the gym, I lay on the floor and struggled, or did half press-ups from the waist upwards until the instructor came over and reduced me once again to lying on the floor and struggling. When teams were picked for games I was always one of the last to be picked. When there were running races I always came last, except for on one occasion when I thought I had at last beaten one other boy and he said I had cheated by pushing him.

I had to play the field game (the Eton version of football) in the lowest house team with boys so much younger and smaller than me that I used to trip over them. When

I eventually protested I was allowed not to play as long as I agreed to remain captain of the team.

In the summer I did rowing to avoid having to play cricket but I did nearly all my rowing on my own, because I was seldom selected for a house four. On one Sunday, though, my tutor, who was enthusiastic about cricket, insisted that I should play for his scratch team against the house eleven. He must have been having difficulty in making up the numbers. I was extremely reluctant, but I could not stand up to him. In the course of the game I dropped a catch off his bowling, and he was publicly angry with me. I was furious, because he knew I was no good at games and it was he who had forced me to play.

In spite of my uselessness at organised sport I often enjoyed physical activity as much as any other young creature. When my strength finally began to catch up with my height, when I was sixteen or so, I was even beginning to enjoy exercises in the gym, but by then we were allowed to stop, so I stopped. The school's approach, instead of encouraging my participation, had halted it.

It is hard to see what I had been supposed to learn. You would imagine that a school that valued sport would hope to develop every child's strength and skill as far as possible, and even where strength and skill were minimal, to generate some enthusiasm. What in fact happened was that the good athletes received every encouragement and the problems and interests of the poor athletes were ignored.

However useless drill might have been in learning languages, it seemed a more reasonable approach in the Corps, the Combined Cadet Force. After all, what they were teaching us was drill. Before we started I was worried about whether I would ever learn how to do it, because of my physical awkwardness, but it was impossible not to learn drill. It was explained by retired NCOs who had been used to teaching people of every possible level of intelligence and athleticism, and we did every movement over and over and over again. 'Squa-ad . . . 'shun! Slo-ope . . . hipe! Preeesent . . . hipe! Order . . . hipe! Stand at . . . ease!' And again and again and again.

Although I would love to say that drill doesn't work, I have to admit that it can make you learn. On the other hand it does not teach you to understand anything.

I was regularly humiliated in PE and games, but I was also sometimes humiliated in lessons, and not by only my ignorance.

I was called to the front of one class to read aloud from the Bible when my voice was breaking and I was squeaking and growling without being aware of it. Not surprisingly the class was convulsed with laughter. Eventually the teacher had mercy on me. It was certainly not his fault that my voice was breaking, but it is an example of being required to do something that for some reason beyond one's control one simply cannot do. It was in a way the opposite of the Greek question

difficulty: the interrogative words I should have been able to learn without difficulty, but speaking in a consistent tone was physically impossible. What made it worse was that I was not aware of the way my voice was behaving, and had no idea why I was being laughed at. The same sort of physical difficulty occurs for people who are colour-blind or tone-deaf, not just for a few days but for their whole lives, and both problems are by definition incomprehensible to those who suffer from them.

Once or twice I experienced verbal assault from teachers, and Fishy Rowe, a particular physics teacher left a deep impression. At the beginning of our first lesson with him we were given the text-book for the term, which was on the subject of light. I glanced through it. He then asked who thought that light always travelled in straight lines. After a bit of looking round to see how everyone else was going to answer all the rest of the boys put up their hands, but I had already glanced the book, so I didn't. In a heavily sarcastic tone, Mr. Rowe asked me what I thought, then. 'You can bend it, sir,' I said. His reaction told me that however right I was, it was the wrong answer.

It was also Fishy Rowe who screwed up a big piece of work that I had done and threw it into the waste-paper basket because it did not have my name on it. I protested that it did have my name on it, so he made me come to the front of the class, pick it out of the basket and smooth it out on his desk. I pointed to my name. 'Too small,' he said.

I have resented this behaviour all my life. Fishy Rowe was the only teacher who ever chose to pick me out as a trouble-maker and to put me in my place, and it had been unjust. If other teachers had treated me in the same way I am sure I would have learnt to resent all authority. Any boys who were picked on regularly in this way must have been driven into exactly the kind of rebelliousness that their masters were trying to repress.

My failures and difficulties with learning perhaps had more influence on my later ideas than my successes did. I learnt that it is difficult, if not impossible, to learn information that you find completely uninteresting and has no particular meaning for you. It is difficult to learn when the only reason for learning is that you are under pressure, not from events but from institutions or people. It is difficult to learn when your efforts are not appreciated. It is difficult to learn when you are bored and would desperately prefer to be doing something else. It is difficult to learn when you can't see the point. It is difficult to learn what you don't understand.

It is easy to learn when you are interested.

It is easiest of all to learn when you have chosen to do so yourself.

It is of course not only teachers who humiliate children at school. Other children do it too. I was frightened of the bigger boys at Eton, but I was lucky in that I was

never systematically bullied. I remember only one incident, when I arrived in a classroom early to find two other boys already there – large and academically unsuccessful, but with plenty of hard-won social influence. ‘Here’s Gribble,’ one of them said. ‘He’s mad.’ I had no idea how to respond. This tiny incident was enough to suggest to me the horrors of real verbal bullying.

My house had been newly created when I arrived and was more civilised than many others, but one morning break, when we were standing round in the common-room, having biscuits and a drink, one of the older boys twisted the arm of a younger one and made him kneel down and kiss his shoes. The victim was a pretty boy, but whether that was anything to do with it I do not know. He cried, but none of us made any comment, we just watched.

We were surrounded by others and ruled by the ethics of the gang. At Eton we did at least each have rooms of our own where we could, for a while, be ourselves without being watched by others. In most other boarding schools children are grouped together even while they sleep.

The danger of private rooms is that they can be invaded by enemies. When I once went into someone's room and saw that he was being tortured by a bunch of bigger boys, I turned and went out without protesting.

The only times I felt safe were when I was alone, or when I was with a group of friends. As soon as I found myself with boys I knew less well, I was frightened.

The status of the bigger boys was such that I was still frightened of them when I went back to visit the school in my late twenties. What alarmed me most was their appearance as they walked back from the playing-fields wearing immensely long scarves in the colours of their various teams, wound twice round their necks, across their chests and tied round their backs, leaving the ends almost trailing in the mud behind them.

Until I was fifteen or so it was impossible for me to question the values I was being taught. By then I had absorbed so much that when I thought I was rebelling I was only being mildly eccentric. I dressed up as the head of the house. For a bet I wore a home-made tie with a picture of a girl in a bathing suit on it, but I wore it under a jersey. (In the same spirit, a boy in my house used to wear red socks under the regulation grey ones. I rather admired him for this.)

One evening at supper, for no particular reason, I moved the apples from a bowl into a pottery water-jug. The head of the house asked for the apples, so we passed him the jug, and when he had difficulty getting his hand in to lift one out, he turned the whole jug of water upside down into his own lap. I still laugh about it as I write, not because he was tricked, because I had had no intention of tricking anybody, but because my aimless fiddling had had such a spectacular result.

I was not made a member of the Library, that is to say a house prefect, until the last two or three weeks of my last term – my tutor thought every boy should have the experience of responsibility before leaving, however undignified and irresponsible he was. I have no memory at all of that experience of responsibility.

Most senior boys took their responsibilities seriously. I identified an expression which I called 'the Etonian frown.' It was the frown of a slightly worried authority figure, anxious above all to do what was expected, which was to make sure that others did what was expected. I deliberately excluded myself from that world, and I don't think it was because if I had tried to join it, it would have excluded me.

Away from school I was part of another world where behaviour was entirely different. This was Great Glemham House, where a family of my cousins lived. When I visited we were usually five or six cousins of more or less the same age, and the atmosphere was more relaxed than either at my home, or of course at school. There always seemed to be things going on that you could join in with if you wanted to. There was no pressure to do anything in particular, but it always felt as if something exciting was about to happen that you would not want to miss. Adults who visited the house sometimes felt neglected, because they were treated in the same way as the children – they were left to do what they wanted instead of being deliberately drawn into whatever was going on. For me it was paradise. I felt able to be myself, and I felt appreciated.

I have drawn a dismal picture of my life at Eton, but there were pleasures there. Some of the pleasures were similar to the pleasures at Connaught House, but rather more sophisticated. The films had sound and sometimes even colour. I saw *Hellzapoppin*, *Blithe Spirit*, *The Lady Vanishes*, *Mr. Deeds comes to Town*, *Destry rides again*. The chapel organs were more impressive than the little one at Connaught House, and when Sir Thomas Beecham conducted the London Symphony Orchestra at a concert in the School Hall I was lucky enough to find a seat in the front row.

I was enthralled by a school production of *Macbeth*, and a performance of *Ten Little Niggers* done in one of the boarding houses. I loved taking part in our own house plays – *The Monkey's Paw*, *The Bathroom Door* and *The Safe Murder*. I had the last line in *The Safe Murder* – 'I didn't do it! I didn't do it! It was Bates! Bates! Bates!' I sent shivers up and down my own spine, even if no one else's.

Exploring parts of the school buildings that were out of bounds was a hobby for a few week-ends. My friends and I managed to get under the stage in the School Hall and into the upper rooms in Lupton's Tower, the Tudor tower between the School Yard and the Cloisters.

I had a marvellous afternoon with two other boys kicking a football around in a fog so thick that you couldn't see the person you were passing to.

I enjoyed indoor cricket, which was played with a squash ball and a ruler, and I enjoyed 'ragging'. One of my best memories is of a huge rag in a field on the way back from watching a cricket match against Winchester. Our whole house had been driven there in a coach, and when we stopped for a picnic supper we also had time for an exhilarating mass romp.

It was the done thing to hate field days, when we dressed up in our CCF military uniforms and were driven off to Aldershot or somewhere nearby to have whole-school mock battles. We would be out in the country, away from the school, and some of the time you could lounge around chatting, and some of the time you were involved in exciting role-play, with blank ammunition that made authentically loud bangs. I enjoyed field days.

For two or three years maths was a major pleasure, and each time I solved a problem I was delighted. There were also a few teachers whose lessons were generally enjoyable.

The most enjoyable regular occupation, though, was conversation. On Sundays, particularly, when sport was forbidden, we would gather in someone's room and just talk – talk about anything and everything – and although I cannot remember the subject of any of these conversations I remember the friendliness and the relaxation and often feeling that what we were discussing was important.

The most joyful period of all was during the 1947 floods. The water rose and rose, and some of the classrooms could only be reached by using rows of chairs as stepping-stones. There was a rule against travelling by bus, but if you ran behind one it cleared the water away in front of you. That way it was possible to get from Eton to Windsor, but one boy tripped over and was submerged. And then the drains flooded, and we were all sent home.

The Times had a fourth leader about our exodus, taking the line that although everyone else was made miserable by the floods, to us they had brought delight. In those days it was taken for granted that every schoolboy longed to escape from school.

My school days were certainly not the best days of my life. And nor were they for most people, not even for the author of that fourth leader. Yet the capacity for joy is something that declines as you grow older. The delight of young children is often so glorious that it infects all the adults within range. Your childhood ought to be the best time of your life. All you need is freedom and the right environment.

My idea of the right environment has been expanding as I have grown older. When I was a young child it included untouched snow, the sea-side and the little streams near my home than ran hidden under bushes and trees; we explored them barefoot and built dams out of clay. Bonfires were part of the right environment, and books and Minibrix and toy soldiers and fantasy buildings made of rugs and chairs.

Sawing up a fallen apple tree into logs with my sister Jane was important, because we were doing something with a practical rather than imaginary purpose. Reading was important; Arthur Ransome's *The Big Six* was one of the only two books that I have been so absorbed in that I missed a meal. (The other, fifteen years later, was *War and Peace*.)

By the time I left school the right environment had expanded to include many friends, more parts of the country, music, laughter, maths, theatre, writing, performance. All this, even the good parts of the music, maths and writing, happened outside the classroom. Conversation, friendship, exploration, self-discovery, reading, absorption were all possible from time to time, but the school routine interrupted and hindered them. During term-time at Eton, for instance, even an enthusiastic reader like me could find no time to read books of my own choice.

Academic study was only a small part of being educated at Eton. Being educated also entailed 'capping' masters when you passed them in the street, that is to say making the gesture of touching your cap to them. It meant accepting bounds beyond which one might not go. It meant tolerating bullying. It meant submitting to corporal punishment. It meant having to be in your house every evening by 6.45. It meant wearing a school uniform that was as distinctive as an American convict's stripes. It meant, in short, having to accept a tyrannical regime.

Being educated produced a peculiar mixture of purpose and aimlessness. Because most of what I had to do was a chore rather than a pleasure, my purpose was to do as little of it as possible without drawing attention to myself. Because most of what I had to do seemed to attract no benefit, either to me or to anyone else, I felt I was wasting my time and being held back from playing my part in the world. I remember on one occasion feeling a tempestuous envy of the man who was delivering the coal, because he was actually doing something useful. My purpose was, on the whole, to avoid doing what the school wanted me to do, and my aimlessness was a result of barren lessons.

I felt excluded at school because I made no mark, even in the things I enjoyed, like writing, music and drama. Perhaps I excluded myself, because I refused to accept some of the conventions that were supposed to govern our lives. I was an outsider, but I didn't enjoy being an outsider. I wanted to move into a world where I would be accepted.

It seems clear that both at school and afterwards I learnt most readily from work that I chose for myself – reading the kind of books I liked, writing my own stories, playing jazz, puzzling over mathematical problem papers, even working through text-books on my own. I don't remember ever having one of those inspiring teachers who feature in government advertisements devised to recruit into the profession. I remember teachers I liked, teachers I admired, teachers whose lessons I enjoyed and

teachers whose lessons I hated, teachers I feared and teachers I pitied, but I don't remember one who inspired me.

By the time I left Eton I was beginning to be critical and to perform occasional timid acts of mild rebellion, but school just seemed to be a part of life, something to be endured while I did my best to have fun with my friends and to follow my own interests. I had no idea that there was any possible alternative.

I had learnt that I was an eccentric outsider.

I had learnt that achievement in sport and lessons won respect, and useful activities like cooking, cleaning and delivering coal were the work of inferiors.

I had learnt that the right clothes and the right accent authorise you to behave with extreme arrogance.

I had learnt that my personal interests were not important.

I had learnt that my musical ability was not to be taken seriously.

I had learnt that family and friendship were private matters, and unimportant in relation to the regular business of the day.

I had learnt that affection, enjoyment and laughter were no more than decorations on the surface of life.

I had learnt that it was essential to disguise my true feelings.

I had learnt that what happened at school and what happened outside school were entirely separate. It was necessary to develop two personalities.

I had learnt that status was highly important, and that I didn't have it. I had learnt that I must often submit to unreasonable demands.

I had learnt that I must try to hide my disagreements with authority, and to accept physical punishment when I failed to do so..

I had learnt that there were two dominant orders of morality - that of the staff and that of the boys: the second carried the greater sanctions. Neither corresponded to my personal morality.

I had learnt it was safer to behave badly than to behave too well.

I had learnt that a position of authority gave you the right to be wrong.

I had learnt that power mattered more than principle.

I had learnt that we are all prisoners of society, and that those who reach the highest positions are those who co-operate with the warders.

I had learnt that a combination of boredom, humiliation, suppressed rebellion and continual fear is an inevitable background to anything enjoyable that may happen.

I had learnt that some of the time it is possible to accept such an environment and carry on with your own life in spite of it, but at other times it swamps you.

I had learnt that there is no escape.

It was years before I managed to draw any different conclusions.

CHAPTER THREE

FINDING A DIRECTION

When I left Eton I turned down the offer of a place at Cambridge in two and a half year's time because I thought that having once experienced the joys of the outside world I would not want to submit to being educated again. And I thought it was time I started doing things for myself in the world, instead of having things done to me.

For most of the next two years my life was still organised for me by my parents. I was sent to Austria to learn German and to learn to ski. I mention this because the journey out was my first experience of independence. Fifty years later I travelled by train along part of the same route, and I was filled with an unexpected delight which I think must have been due to a memory of the excitement of at last having been genuinely on my own. I learnt a little German, but I failed to learn to ski.

Then I was sent to Paris to learn French, and I lived for two months with a family in Neuilly who I still remember with affection. I did not lead a wild student life, but I did learn some French.

I corresponded frequently with friends, and I rediscovered poetry. Stephen Plowden inspired me to take an interest in it again, simply by himself being carried away by the line, 'Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks in Vallombrosa.' He then gave me a book called *Understanding Poetry*, by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, and I read most of it more than once.

After France I was sent to London to learn shorthand and typing. Most of my friends were doing their National Service in the armed forces, which I had escaped because I was an asthmatic. It was a lonely time.

The secretarial course was like school; the only difference was that I did learn something that was going to be useful to me for the rest of my life – I learnt to touch-type. I also learnt a little commercial French, some basic book-keeping and a lot of shorthand which all shared the same characteristic with a great deal of what is taught in schools – they are all useful only if you follow particular careers. I was quite interested in all three subjects, but I have never used any of them.

When I had finished with the secretarial course I was employed in the office of a retail tobacco company owned by my father. I checked invoices, entered sums of money into ledgers and typed out endless copies of a circular letter which began, 'Dear Sir, the first shipment of Havana cigars to the United Kingdom since 1939 has just arrived and is in bond in London.' I watched a busker out of the window one morning and saw that he earned more in an hour than I did. On the other hand he

was playing music, and all I was doing was standing by a window counting how many people threw money into his hat.

The tobacco business also owned a wine shop. I had another experience of failing to learn something that should have been perfectly easy when my father wanted me to learn the names of the various different kinds of French and German wines, and where they came from. I looked at the lists, I read them over and over again, but they meant nothing to me and I could not learn them.

The names of the personnel on jazz records, though, I could remember without any trouble. When you are bored your attention fades and your ability to memorise evaporates: when you are interested you learn easily.

I learnt to drive. Driving lessons seem to come in a category of their own: you badly want to learn; you have a teacher all to yourself and right from the very beginning you learn to drive by driving; very nearly everyone eventually passes the test.

The purpose of driving instruction is to teach people to drive; the purpose of instruction at school seems all too often to be to rank people rather than to teach them anything. It took me a long time to learn to drive – I had to take my test three times – but my instructor never told me that I was stupid, or that I was slower at learning than other people. He persevered and I persevered and in the end, as is almost always the case, we succeeded. Had his purpose been merely to rank me in comparison with his other clients I might well have given up the effort.

I still conformed to the culture of the class I had been born into. I was occasionally invited to deb dances, and I actually owned a set of evening tails, handed down to me by my father. I learnt to shoot, extremely badly. I kept my shoes carefully polished. When I bought a suit that was a little loud for its time, I was ashamed when a young man four or five years older than me, and therefore much to be respected, said, 'Very nice, if you can stand the noise.' I bought felt hats, because my brother-in-law wore a felt hat, and I regularly left them behind on trains.

This was hardly the glorious freedom that I had been expecting once I had escaped from school. Every week-end I went home to my mother, and after paying for my board and lodging, my lunch and my train fare I had very little money left for anything else. Sometimes I went without lunch in order to be able to go to a film in the evening. Almost every Wednesday I went to hear Humphrey Lyttelton at 100 Oxford Street. Very occasionally I had enough money to take a girl to the jazz club or a theatre. I discovered, with a friend who had also escaped national service, that you could get drunk comparatively cheaply on a mixture of gin and Guinness.

None of this gave me any sense of having found a purpose and direction for my life. That came at the age of twenty, when I suddenly realised that I often preferred the company of children to the company of adults, and that I would therefore like to

become a teacher. I re-applied to Cambridge, and was awarded a place for the following September. In the meantime I applied for several temporary jobs in prep schools – prep schools because state schools would not take untrained teachers and public schools required a degree. I was eventually employed for two terms at Manor House School in Ealing, commuted out of London rather than into it, and enjoyed the luxury of almost empty trains.

It is curious that having been so eager to get out of education, I was now eager to get back into it. At Manor House and, after Cambridge, at Repton School, I found myself having to try to enforce exactly the kind of discipline that I had so resented at Eton. I knew of no other method. I enjoyed being with the children, as I had expected, but I did not enjoy trying to exert my authority over them.

At the end of my two terms at Manor House I went up to Cambridge. Cambridge, of course, was not like Eton, although Eton was more like Cambridge than any other public school. Undergraduates who came straight from other schools found the unfamiliar freedom difficult to cope with and took terms to discover how to organise their own work. I and my friends of the same age, who had done their two years of National Service, looked down on them because they seemed juvenile and foolish. I did not then realise how handicapped I had been by my own education. I did not at first understand how a learner and a teacher could co-operate, rather than the learner simply submitting. I now see that those inexperienced nineteen-year-olds were doubly disadvantaged.

University was a refreshing change. The question of submitting to personal authority did not arise. Dons did not dominate you or humiliate you, they even seemed interested in what you had to say. They set you work and they corrected it but the whole feeling was different; it was no longer merely a question of finding the right answer – you were encouraged to think for yourself. In any case I was there because I had chosen to be there, so I could understand that they were helping me to achieve my own aim, rather than trying to force me to achieve some aims of their own.

The institution, as opposed to the individual dons, was mildly authoritarian. You had to eat in College so many days a week, you had to attend two tutorials a week, you had to sign a book every time you came in after ten o'clock, you had to wear a gown to lectures and after dark, you had to be in by midnight, but all this seemed trifling after a boarding school regime.

I had my own rooms – not one room, like at Eton, but a bedroom and a study. Lectures were voluntary. The work was interesting, although I found myself disliking some of the set books merely because it was compulsory to read them. I had time to write. I had a piano in my room. The libraries were wonderful, and if

you were reading in the University Library after lunch you could rest your knees against the padded bar under the table, lean back in your padded chair and go to sleep.

There was no compulsory sport, so I did none, apart from an occasional game of tennis. I had some of my best friends, who had just finished their National Service, in other colleges. There were parties almost every week-end.

I remember one or two occasions when I was impressed by my teachers. One was when a lecturer actually wept as he read out a poem by Baudelaire. “‘Et mon coeur’,” he read, his voice breaking, “‘comme un bloc rouge et glacé’ - you get the contrast there, ‘rouge’ and ‘glacé’?” I was astonished to see a lecturer so moved that he was not ashamed to cry in front of his students, and I was astonished to see that the poetry we were studying with academic detachment could have such a powerful effect.

And I remember my supervisor, Dr. Ladborough, commenting on an essay I had written on a play by Molière. I had said that some of the humour seemed surprisingly modern, and he asked me what I meant. I said it reminded me of cartoons in the New Yorker. He told me that that was exactly what I should have said. I was surprised and pleased, because I had suspected that to compare Molière to the New Yorker would be considered impertinent, because it was linking university subject-matter, something that was by definition highbrow, with something I read purely for amusement. At school I had found it impossible to reconcile literature and entertainment; at university it was not merely possible, it was commendable.

During one Easter vacation I went to a course for foreigners at the University of Tours. There was a lecturer there who spoke for two or three hours about ‘Correspondances,’ a sonnet by Baudelaire. (It is curious that Baudelaire should feature so often in my memories, because he is not one of my favourite poets.) It was an example of what the French call a ‘lecture expliquée,’ an explained reading, and the lecturer went into every possible implication of every phrase, word, rhythm, alliteration and variation of word order. I was fascinated by this technique, which I had never met before, and was able to put it to good use when I got back to Cambridge. One of my own imitations was used almost word for word in a lecture there, and that lecture too I enjoyed, though perhaps not for the right reason.

The same lecturer who honoured me by more or less reading out my essay, told us about a novel by Balzac apparently called *La Cousine bête* (*The Stupid Cousin*). It was only when I found it in a bookshop that I found out that it was actually called *La Cousine Bette* (*Cousin Betty*.) A perfect accent was not considered an essential qualification.

One year I chose to sit an exam on European Drama from 1880 - 1900, because I liked plays and twenty years sounded a pleasantly limited stretch of time. It may have been a limited time, but it did not have limited subject-matter – Chekov, Ibsen, Strindberg, Wilde, the early Shaw, Pinero, Schnitzler, Maeterlinck, Alfred Jarry, Gerhart Hauptmann and others. The don who coached me had seen most of the plays when they were first performed in London, which gave an unusual immediacy to the course.

We were given huge reading lists which nobody took seriously. Many of my fellow-students of modern languages would read all the literature in translation, or, perhaps even more effectively, read only the English introductions to foreign-language versions, where you could find discussions of all the important questions without the trouble of sweating through the whole book.

The exams were pretty futile. I learnt a few quotations that I thought could be used in any context and I got an upper second. That was in spite of a German essay paper, in which we had to hand in the plan we were supposed to have made before we started writing. The topic was humour; my first sentence was, 'There are two kinds of humour,' and my last was, 'Thus we see there are three kinds of humour.' I had difficulty explaining this in my plan.

Academic work did not occupy the majority of my time. I developed a rough routine of working six hours on Monday, when I was making up for the week-end's partying, five on Tuesday, four on Wednesday, three on Thursday, two on Friday and one on Saturday at the beginning of another idle week-end. There were long spaces of boredom and loneliness and disillusionment.

I wrote songs for the Footlights, the Cambridge revue society, and I occasionally performed in cabaret with them. In both the years that I had material in the annual revues, they transferred to London. In my last year I was editor of *Granta*, then a university magazine.

There was less need to conform than there had been at school or at home, but I am astonished when I see photographs of us as we were then – all wearing tweed coats and ties and no one wearing jeans. And at the Footlights smoking concerts we all wore dinner jackets.

In spite of the feeling of freedom, in spite of the Footlights and *Granta*, in spite of a complacent feeling of being a well-known figure in a limited sphere, I was still not living as an independent adult. I was being fed and housed, I had no responsibility for the welfare of anyone else and I had no means of influencing the way in which I was myself being looked after and controlled. It never occurred to me that I might be able to influence even the running of my college, let alone the university.

My purpose was to get a qualification in order to be able get a job, and I enjoyed the work I had to do. I played a role in student activities like the Footlights and

Granta, but apart from that I had no voice and no responsibility. As undergraduates we respected the force of tradition so deeply that we never expected to be listened to if we questioned it, so we never even considered making suggestions. We were still protégés, fledglings. We had not yet left the nest.

I got my degree, but that was not my most important gain. My most important gain had come from the three years of security and independence during which I had been able to shed some of the inhibitions, misconceptions and anxieties that I had learnt from my school education. I did not shed them all, but by the time I left Cambridge I had become more self-confident, stronger and more self-aware.

As soon as I had my degree I went to teach modern languages at Repton School.

I had hoped, I suppose, that once I reached the status of teacher I would find myself on an equal footing with the rest of the staff. I was disappointed to find that there was a humiliating hierarchy among the adults as well. I learnt this when one of the senior staff accidentally knocked a ruler off a table; he began to bend down to pick it up but then noticed that I was standing nearby and waited. In the end I picked it up and gave it to him. It was submissive, but I felt it was less submissive than just putting the ruler back on the table. I don't suppose he noticed, but other junior staff giggled about it approvingly later on. The giggling showed that they felt inferior too.

I found myself accused of a much larger act of rebellion when I was the teacher responsible for overseeing the production of the school magazine. The headmaster read a poem in the proofs that he considered to be critical of the school, and he called in the boy editor and lectured him. I sent the headmaster a note to say that it was my fault that the poem was accepted, and I thought he should have spoken to me rather than the boy. It was my turn to be called in, and I remember exactly what he said: 'If you think you can tell me how to run my school then the sooner you start looking for another job the better.'

Had I properly digested my public school education, perhaps this response would not have surprised me. I had foolishly supposed that the headmaster might have been ready to listen to what I had to say, and even to allow the possibility that I might be right. I had not understood that any criticism was automatically seen as insubordination, and that any critic must therefore be disciplined. I had forgotten that authority gave you the right to be wrong.

We were allowed a great deal of freedom in how we taught, but on the whole I still taught as I had been taught myself, that is to say that I taught German and French as if they were dead languages. I searched the store-room for interesting story-books and I occasionally took my guitar into the class to sing folk-songs, but otherwise I followed the course-books that we were given as a basic syllabus. You

will know the pattern – a passage describing the Braun family's house, or a shopping expedition in a French market, followed by a page or so of grammatical instruction, some exercises to test your understanding of the grammar and then, as a climax, some sentences to be translated from English into the foreign language. I knew no better.

I had a surprise one day when I was taking a French class for a teacher who was absent and I found myself obliged to try to help the boys to learn a list of conjunctions which are always followed by the subjunctive. What seemed strange was that I, with a good degree in modern languages, able to converse and write reasonably well in French, was obliged to try to help boys of sixteen to learn an abstruse list that I did not know myself. It reminded me of 'The father, the mother, the brother, the young man, the old man, the prophet, the dog.'

I tried to avoid burdening my own classes with such unnecessary knowledge, and concentrated on the simple errors that they were making in what they were supposed to have learnt already. I was beginning to see that it is always best to start from where your pupils are, within their ZPD.²

I was not a good disciplinarian, and was always worrying that my classes might erupt into chaos. Even the sixth-formers who had chosen to come to French in the three lessons a week where they could choose their own subjects, would sense that I was unskilled at keeping order, and would disrupt their lessons from time to time.

One of my easier classes was a group of twenty who were starting on German. A pupil-teacher came for the second term of the year, and so that he could have a class of his own to practise on, this group of twenty was divided into two, so we only had ten pupils each. To my surprise this did not make class control any easier. Instead of one group to manage, I now had ten individuals. I managed, but with difficulty. The pupil-teacher was an apparently self-confident, aggressive young man who rather frightened me, so I was even more surprised to find that his lessons with his half of the group were totally out of control, with bits of chalk flying round the class-room as if they were in an old-fashioned school story.

With the jazz-band, on the other hand, a group of about eight enthusiasts who met in their free time, supposedly under my direction, there was never any question of anything but purposeful practice. I ran the school play-reading group, too, another voluntary free-time activity. The boys came because they wanted to. As a boy I had myself experienced the pleasure of working with an adult co-operatively, and now as an adult I experienced the pleasure of co-operating with teen-agers. This

² ZPD stands for Zone of Proximal Development, an idea taken from the theories of the Russian psychologist (Newman and Holzman, 1993). There is considerable disagreement about what he actually meant by the term, but what I understand it to mean is the zone of knowledge which, though not yet assimilated, is within reach of the learner's present understanding.

was seldom a pleasure I enjoyed in the classroom, and I still did not see how it could be.

The informality was never absolute. Both outside the classroom as well as inside I found I was expected to require conformity. It was not only the staff who expected this, it was also the boys. Even in the jazz band, where I was neither the leader nor the most skilful, there was an invisible barrier that prevented genuine friendship. There was something that resembled friendship, but I had a holiday acquaintance who was a pupil at the school, Barney Rickett, and my relationship with him was different. He was eighteen and I was twenty-four, so away from the school we were equals. He spoke to me as an equal at school just as in the holidays, and although we did not even know each other particularly well, we were both able to be natural and genuine.

At Repton, as at Eton, there was a daily service in chapel and a double dose on Sundays. I remember extraordinarily little about it. Sometimes there was a good visiting preacher, and I was made to think hard by a sermon from Simon Phipps, who I had seen before as a performer with the Footlights at Cambridge. It was about how we all draw lines above kinds of behaviour that we will not descend to – 'I might do that, but I would never do that.' He pointed out to us the fact that we also draw lines which we will not cross in the opposite direction – we will go so far to help our neighbour, but to go further we would consider unreasonable. This second kind of line, he suggested, was the kind we must try to get across. He rounded the sermon off with the ultimate Christian example. In the Garden of Gethsemane Christ drew a line, and he got a cross.

The combination of a high moral message, a good pun and the story of Christ was memorable, but I was beginning to distinguish between morality and religion. For years I had accepted the link and been in awe of the authority of God's word. What I suppose I would have to call my faith was gradually worn away by a series of small discoveries and events.

Another visiting preacher at Repton took as his text 'Go, and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor,' and immediately followed this by saying, 'This of course does not mean that we should give all our money to the poor.'

During the holidays I heard a clergyman declaring his adherence to the Thirty-nine Articles³ when he was being inducted into his parish, and many of the Articles seemed to me to be completely unacceptable.

Whenever I said the Apostle's Creed in church I had to make a few private reservations.

³ The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion define the doctrines of the Church of England.

Perhaps the event which most helped me towards an opinion of my own was a discussion with another teacher at Repton, Tim Fisher, whose father had been Archbishop of Canterbury. I said that I didn't think that children needed to be taught the difference between right and wrong. He asked me how, if they weren't taught, they were ever to know. I was surprised, because it seemed to me that the difference was self-evident, and I wondered how, if there was no possibility of any rational understanding of moral issues, children were to know what teaching to believe.

At Repton at that time caning was common, friendship between adults and children was impossible, the boys had only seven or eight hours a week when they were free to choose what to do (apart from short breaks between meals and lessons), there was compulsory chapel every day and compulsory military training once a week, competitive games and school loyalty were considered fundamental to moral development and I was not very successful at maintaining discipline in my classes.

It was a caning that eventually drove me away. I was the unwilling authority behind the beating. I was teaching French to the least able O-Level group, who were obliged to take the exam in spite of the fact that they were all expected to fail it. This absence of expectation created a more relaxed atmosphere than in the ambitious top classes, and the boys in the class were on the whole cheerful and friendly. It was a school rule that you were not allowed to eat in class; I always did my best not to notice discreet consumption, but one day a boy called Mansell actually threw a sweet across the class to a friend and I decided I had to acknowledge the system and give a punishment. The standard punishment for eating in class was a beating, but I did not want to cause anyone to be beaten, so I set Mansell some lines to write. Lines had to be written on special blue paper which could only be obtained from the housemasters. The next morning Scotty Cheshire, the boy's housemaster, came to me and told me that he had asked what the lines had been given for, and when he heard had beaten the boy. It was then that I decided that I had to leave, and gave in my notice without having thought seriously about what I might do next.

I applied for a few jobs in state schools which I did not get, and then, by pure chance, while browsing in a bookshop, I came across Victor Bonham Carter's book about Dartington Hall. Most of it describes the restoration of the buildings and the establishment of the farms, the forestry and the other businesses, but it ends with a fifty-page supplement about the school on the estate, written by Bill Curry, the head teacher. I read most of this supplement in the short time I had to wait, and I was astonished and delighted.

In the bookshop I skipped from page to page and found passages like this:

At Dartington we have had no patriotic assemblies, exercises or celebrations, and the usual methods of promoting nationalist feeling have been entirely avoided. The atmosphere of the School has been one which would encourage children to think of

themselves firstly as members of the human race, and only secondly as members of a particular country.

Curry, 1970, p 199

There was one of Repton's fundamental aspects of moral training demolished. And I read this:

There has been no religious observance in the school, and there has been no attempt to teach the doctrine of any particular sect. There have been classes about religion when they have been asked for, and, of course, children have been free to attend local churches. Our attitude to religion has been part of our attitude to controversial issues generally. If I tell a boy that seven sixes are forty-two, he is not likely to meet another mathematician who will deny this. The multiplication table is part of knowledge and can be communicated as such. But if I tell a boy that the doctrine of the Trinity is true (or false) he will have no difficulty in finding a learned theologian or philosopher to disagree with me. Religious propositions are not, therefore, part of knowledge, but part of opinion . . . On all such issues our attitude has been that the pupils should be helped to find out, not told what to believe.

Ibid. p 219-210

And there went another of those fundamental principles.

We began by discarding the traditional notion (which certainly informed the schools in which I was brought up) that a school must be organized on the assumption that children would prefer to remain ignorant, and that it must therefore have an apparatus of bribery and coercion designed to overcome this preference. Unfortunately this assumption tends to justify itself, since when you act upon it the content and method of your teaching pays so little heed to the natural interests and preferences of the child, that you *create* in him that distaste for learning to which you will triumphantly point as the justification for what you are doing.

Ibid p. 212-213

I had experienced that distaste as a child, and seen its effects as a teacher.

We have therefore dispensed with marks, competition and prizes, and it has been part of the teacher's function to make what he had to teach seem worth learning. There has been no compulsion to learn, and there have always been a few children who, for the time being, have chosen not to learn. Our teachers have had no power to punish, unless exclusion from the class be deemed a punishment. This latter power affords a proper protection both of the teacher and of those pupils, nearly always a majority, who wish to work. for if a pupil comes into the mathematics room and proceeds to disrupt the class, or engage in non-mathematical pursuits, it is entirely reasonable to ask him to go and not do mathematics somewhere else. He may claim the right to waste his own time, but he cannot claim the right to waste other people's time.

Ibid. p. 213

In the jazz band and the play-reading society at Repton I had known the delight of working with children who want to learn, and learning with them. Curry raised the possibility of this delight in an ordinary classroom.

He also quoted this passage from Bertrand Russell:

Where authority is unavoidable, what is needed is reverence. . . . The man who has reverence will not think it his duty to 'mould' the young. He feels in all that lives, and most of all in children, something sacred, indefinable, unlimited, something individual and strangely precious, the growing principle of life, and embodied fragment of the dumb striving of the world. In the presence of a child he feels an unaccountable humility – a humility not easily defensible on any rational ground, and yet somehow nearer to wisdom than the easy self-confidence of many parents and teachers.

Ibid. p 195

I recognised this feeling from an experience I had had at Repton. One morning when I was watching the boys walking across the grass towards my classroom I had been struck with awe over my assumption that I could train these people who were already in a way beyond criticism. Youth – even as manifested in those who disturbed my classes or humiliated each other – seemed fragile. It was a heavy responsibility to tamper with it; it was like carrying a priceless Chinese vase.

The more I read of what Curry had to say, the more delighted I became:

I suggest that from the point of view of world order and a democratically planned society, schools should be investigating ways of promoting co-operative effort which is based on the desire to create something which can only exist as the result of co-operation. An orchestra or a dramatic group are examples of this kind of thing. In an orchestra there is no other orchestra to be defeated: nobody wins. Nevertheless, all the genuine merits of the team spirit are present, indeed in a much more severe form than that to be found in team games, since there must be complete subordination, throughout the playing to the score and to the indications of the conductor. But the subordination is due to the common desire to produce something. It is not due to the common desire to defeat something.

Ibid. p 200

Watching house matches at school I had experienced the common desire to defeat something, and been elated by victory. It was not until I saw the crazy enthusiasm at Repton that I understood its dangers.

It may be, of course, that these aggressive and sadistic impulses are too deeply rooted in instinct to be amenable to education and, if so, the prospect for mankind seems pretty gloomy. But in part, at least, I believe them to be the product of unwise handling in infancy and childhood. You have only to watch mothers with their children on beaches and in shopping crowds to see resentment being built up by pushing and slapping and thwarting, and by entirely unnecessary and arbitrary commands, prohibitions and exhortations. How rarely do you see children treated with respect. But if there is anything at all in modern psychological theory one must surely believe that if an

education based upon respect and love and understanding became universal there would be an immense release of instinctive friendliness, a diminution of the hate which results from unwise repression and inhibition, and a great increase in human kindliness. I am the more inclined to believe this because theory and insight seem to be confirmed by experience. Those who have the necessary experience seem to be agreed that in schools conducted along the lines I am advocating the level of kindness, friendliness and mutual tolerance is conspicuously above the average, that there is much less unkindness and bullying, and that when it occurs it is less savage.

Ibid p 201

I, too, was inclined to believe this, in fact I longed to believe it, but as yet I lacked that necessary experience. It was not until years later that I felt I had seen enough to be certain of it.

To be democratic is part of being liberal. If people are to obey rules in which they are not mere pawns in someone else's game, then they must have a share in the framing of those rules. Furthermore it seems clear that the authoritarian atmosphere of the traditional school is a poor preparation for democratic citizenship later on. It is a commonplace that the ordinary adult has little sense of being effectively part of the government, even in a democracy. When things go wrong, he asks why 'they' do not put them right. May not this be, at least in part, because as he grows up he is never given the sense of effective democratic participation?

Ibid pp 204-205

There had been no democratic participation at Repton, and I was thrilled by the idea that it might be possible.

Punishment at Dartington is practically unknown, and the tradition of the School is now strongly opposed to it. We do not regard as punishment payment for breakages, or any form of straightforward restitution. When I say that we are against punishment, I am thinking of punishment as a form of deliberate unpleasantness designed to act either as retribution or as a deterrent. Punishment as retribution seems to me to have no place in civilized societies, though the subject is too big to argue here. . . . I felt with Whitehead that 'The worth of men consists in their liability to persuasion. They can persuade and can be persuaded by the disclosure of alternatives, the better and the worse. Civilization is the maintenance of social order, by its own inherent persuasiveness as embodying the nobler alternative. The recourse to force, however unavoidable, is a disclosure of the failure of civilization, either in the general society or in a remnant of individuals.'

Ibid p 208

So you don't beat a boy for throwing a sweet across the classroom to a friend. That would be a failure of civilization.

. . . And while it is true that many visitors have commented very favourably upon the easy informal relationship between teacher and pupil, and the absence from our classrooms of the discipline-created tension often so noticeable in schools, these are but

part of the general atmosphere of the School. As to what has actually been taught, and how it has been taught, I do not think that we can claim to have departed in important or significant ways from what is done elsewhere. So that while I believe most of our teaching to have been good, and much of it outstanding, I cannot claim that in this field we have done much pioneering. Perhaps, under my successors, this omission will be repaired.

Ibid. p 218

At Repton I had been an unsuccessful disciplinarian. Could it be that the easy informal relationship and the absence discipline-created tension at Dartington would make it possible for me to become a successful teacher? I immediately wrote to ask whether there was a job for me there and I was invited for an interview.

CHAPTER FOUR

DARTINGTON

At my interview the dominant impression was one of colour. To come from the grey suits of Repton to the bright clothes at Dartington was like seeing curtains opened onto a sunny morning.

When I was sitting talking to Isabel Cabot, one of the housemothers, late in the evening a beautiful girl came in, explained to the housemother why she was late and then turned to me and said, 'Hullo. What are you doing here, if that's not a rude question?' There was an assumption of equality of status instead of the barrier I was used to. In the middle of my interview with Hu and Lois Child, the heads of the school, a bare-footed girl burst into their study sprinkling blood from a cut on her foot, asking for first aid. That barrier didn't even exist between the heads and the pupils. I was delighted to be offered a part-time job teaching German at the Senior School.

In the intervening summer holidays I read *Mr. Lyward's Answer*, Michael Burn's book about Finchden Manor, an alternative school for disturbed boys. I was alarmed by an account of an occasion when one of the pupils chased a teacher with an axe. I wondered what I had let myself in for. Dartington turned out to be neither as idyllic as I had hoped, nor as dangerous as I had feared.

I arrived with my jacket and tie, and when the staff were asked what newspapers and magazines the school should subscribe to I suggested *Punch* and *The Times*, like some elderly member of a London club. At the same time, although I was twenty-seven I felt younger than many of the children. So many of them were more confident than I was, more at ease with themselves, more open, less self-conscious with the opposite sex. Without rules to guide me I didn't know how to behave.

I learnt fast.

The atmosphere reminded me of my cousins' house at Glemham. I felt that if I went away from the school for an hour I might miss something. This was not because a great many exciting things were going on, but because most of the time I had an extraordinary feeling of elation. There were lows between the highs – I didn't like the smoking, for instance, and for several weeks during my first term my room was the evening refuge for a fairly antisocial group of children. They might have depressed me about the school altogether, but luckily I met happier people in my lessons.

After a few weeks, when I was still uncertain what I thought of the school, I was invited to spend a week-end with some friends of my mother's who lived on the edge of Dartmoor. I found myself defending the school against them, and believing in my defence. A new housekeeper, who had been appointed at the same time as me, left in disgust after three weeks; the last straw had been coming into my room at ten o'clock one Sunday morning and finding my bed unmade and my pyjamas on the floor. Even the staff, she felt, behaved unacceptably. That made me feel that I was on the side of the school against the rest of the world.

My part-time timetable grew immediately into a full-time one, teaching a little maths and a little French as well as all the German.

By the end of the term I felt I had found my home. At last I had found a place where I could behave naturally and begin to discover what sort of person I was. Years later I edited a book called *That's All, Folks*, an anthology of reminiscences and reflections of former pupils. St. John Gould commented on the way 'the school has on countless occasions taken on insecure, mixed-up people (both pupils and staff) and said goodbye to them as likeable, confident and interesting individuals.' I'm in there somewhere.

The school was run as a democracy. The heads retained a veto, but I do not remember it ever being used. During my first year the entire rule book was thrown out and a new list of rules was created which fitted on one side of a sheet of paper. The school continued to run in an orderly way.

Adults would ask for help, instead of telling people what to do. The system of Useful Work, a daily half-hour of domestic, agricultural, laboratory or maintenance work, was run by the children. There was an atmosphere of co-operation rather than coercion.

There was one boy who had had a particularly grim time at his previous school whose timetable consisted of only two lessons a week. This I found astonishing. What could the school possibly be doing for him? Then I saw how he gradually lost his fear of learning and began to regain his self-respect.

I had been used to the idea that children often cried when they had to go back to school. When I reached Dartington I found that there were children who cried when they had to go home.

At Repton it was assumed that there was an underlying hostility between adults and children. At Dartington this was not so. During my early days at the Senior School two incidents illustrated this particularly clearly.

The first was a concert, given by a string quartet of students from the neighbouring Dartington College of Arts. When I arrived the room was full of school pupils sprawling on the floor, sitting on chairs in informal groups with their backs to the quartet and generally looking thoroughly discourteous and uninterested. Fresh

from Repton, I wondered whether I should try to exert some authority and get them all into line. Luckily I didn't attempt any such thing. When the quartet had finished tuning up, one of them made an announcement in a tiny voice and at once everyone turned towards the musicians. There was total attention throughout the performance. The children who were there had only come because they wanted to hear the music; it would have seemed absurd to them to disturb the musicians who were playing for them. I had been so used to the repressed rebelliousness at Repton that I had not understood this obvious point.

The second situation was in a current affairs meeting, run by another teacher. The topic, which I cannot now remember, was one which interested me, and about which I was fairly knowledgeable, so I went along and sat on a window-sill at one side of the room. After a while the discussion became quite heated, and as so many people seemed to be talking at once, I joined in. To my amazement, the whole room fell silent and listened to what I had to say. I have not got a loud voice, and I don't even know how the group knew that I was speaking, or how they knew that I knew what I was talking about, but somehow they realised that I was speaking and wanted to know what I had to say. At Repton such a reaction would have been unthinkable – once a disorderly discussion was under way, the only way for order to be restored would have been by imposing discipline. Disorder was seen by the boys as a victory over the system: at Dartington the children and the system were on the same side.

I was a teacher and not a pupil, but the distinction was not important except when I was teaching or on duty in the boarding-house. Much of what I did was exactly what the children did. Once a week the play-reading group met, and as I was not the organiser I got good parts to read, and I loved it. I joined the choir and I loved it. I was invited to join the madrigal group and I loved it. I was not able to play the piano in the jazz band because Tim Moore, the music teacher, was a superb jazz pianist, but they needed a bass-player so I learnt to play the bass and I loved it. Every evening children and staff used to meet at around their bed-times in our house-mother's room, and every day I looked forward to the conversation. I wrote the book and lyrics for a musical composed by Tim Moore, and I directed it.

All that was outside the classroom. Inside the classroom (or in my bed-sitting-room, where I often taught small groups) the work was conventional, but we sang songs and we laughed and the atmosphere was entirely different from anything I had known in a classroom before.

If I were to list all the joyful occasions during my two years at the Senior School it would take pages. I remember singing a solo in the spiritual 'Rise Up Shepherd and Follow,' and being able to put all the energy I had into it. I remember playing cocky-olly on a tor on Dartmoor. I remember nearly drowning because I laughed so much when I was swimming with a group of children in the sea and we came across a floating oar; we all clung to it and Peter Adler shouted, 'Bail! Bail, men! Bail!' I

remember my first Christmas party at the Senior School where Dick Heckstall-Smith, an ex-pupil, was playing, and I discovered that his wife knew exactly the same kind of jive as I did.

Neither the children nor the staff within the school were organised into a hierarchy, and on the whole everyone was treated with a proper respect.

Nevertheless, even at Dartington there were blunders made. I remember a new music teacher stopping the school orchestra during a concert and shouting at one of the musicians. The disgracefulness of this public outburst becomes clear when you imagine the same thing happening in an adult orchestra.

It is common to assume that children are in some ways tougher than adults, that they can accept public humiliation without being unduly hurt by it and that they can possibly even learn from it. Most children do indeed learn to shrug it off. The result is that the humiliation no longer has the effect that the teachers intend, and the children become apathetic and insensitive.

At Dartington children never had to develop this defence. Many years later, when my daughter, Emma, was seventeen and had been fourteen years at the school, she was unjustly accused of having lost a crash-mat from the gymnasium. Her furious indignation, she said, must show that she had never been unjustly accused before.

Almost every week-end I used to pack as many people as possible into my Hillman Husky and we would drive up to Dartmoor or down to the sea for the day. An eighteen-year-old girl called Jenny Davies nearly always came on these outings. At Repton I had been distressed by the barrier between staff and pupils. Jenny and I fell in love, and a year after she had left the school we got married.

From Jenny I learnt a new set of values. Decorum doesn't matter, and nor do rules, and nor do appearances. What matters is being concerned about other people, respecting them, being ready to help, showing affection, being aware of oneself. Early in my time at the school when she was visiting my room and playing with the log fire, and I said, 'Don't burn yourself.' She was furious with me for patronising her. And later, when we knew each other better, we were discussing some incident in which school property had been damaged. I was shocked and eager for some kind of retribution, but Jenny pointed out that it was the people who had caused the damage who needed help rather than the school which owned the damaged property. People – and I am astonished that I did not know this in my late twenties – matter more than institutions.

Jenny had a transparent directness that some people found difficult to take. She said things other people preferred to leave unmentioned. She was utterly honest, and honesty was for her more important than avoiding disagreement. She seemed to

me to represent the essence of the school's ideals, but perhaps I had confused the school and the person, because I loved them both.

A year or so before I came to the school a new member of staff had told her off for dribbling a hockey ball across the courtyard on the way to the hockey-pitch. He reminded her that there was a rule against playing with hard balls in the courtyard. Jenny reminded him that there was a difference between playing with hard balls and dribbling a ball down to the hockey-pitch and to prove her point drove her ball through one of the dining-room windows. She then went and fetched a dustpan and brush to sweep up the broken glass before mending the window herself.

One of my first memories of Jenny is seeing her scrubbing a table with huge energy when people were clearing up after a party. Whatever she did, she did whole-heartedly.

She helped down at the nursery school. She introduced me to all the staff from the middle school who had been important in her life and they then became important to me.

One of the teachers she introduced me to was Edna Pitman, who ran the nursery school. Some years later, when our children had grown well past the nursery school age, and I had forgotten the importance of the individuality of a three-year-old, Edna told me that during the previous day she had noticed one of her pupils sitting by himself, looking unhappy. 'I went over,' she said, 'and tried to strike up a conversation.' She did not go over to give him something to do, or to find out what was wrong; she did not even go over to strike up a conversation. She went over to *try* to strike up a conversation. I was reminded that even the very young deserve respect and consideration. Perhaps they need it more than those of us who have learnt to do without it.

When Jenny and I became engaged my mother was at first no happier with her than she was with the general change in my behaviour that had happened since my arrival at Dartington. 'Are you never going to wear a tie again?' she had asked sadly one day, and about Jenny she asked, 'Would you really not mind sitting down to breakfast every day with someone who said "reound" instead of "round"?' I was by then confirmed enough in my new life to feel sorry to have upset her, rather than irritated by what she said.

When I announced that we were going to get married the heads, Hu and Lois Child, told me that as I had been appointed to live in, I would have give up my job. I rang up Jenny to tell her, and I wept. I went down to the Middle School to talk about it with a friend who was working there, Julian David, and I wept. I apologised for crying over what was, after all, only a job, but I cried helplessly.

Many of the pupils felt the same love of the place. Here are a few extracts from *That's all, Folks*, the anthology of memories and reflections that I mentioned earlier.

Before I had always longed for the end of the term. Now it was the other way round: I longed for the end of the holidays.

Michael Young (Gribble, 1987, p. 13)

The contrast of suddenly finding myself at Dartington was staggering and initially quite overwhelming. The beauty, the space and the friendliness simply took over all dimensions.

Sylvia Sharp (Ibid, p 87)

If you were to say 'Dartington' to me now in a free association test, I should answer first 'beauty,' then 'peace,' then 'fun and friendship and interesting classes.'

Kate Russell (Ibid, p 31)

My mother said I could go back to Dartington, but . . . I stayed at South Hampstead and it took me years to get over the feeling that I had cut myself off from paradise.

Leslie von Goetz (Ibid, p 45)

Later, when the real world was partly assimilated, there developed a sort of phobia about going back to Dartington, which I know has been shared by some contemporaries. Perhaps it was a fear that the spell would be broken.

Joe Hackett (Ibid p 108)

What an anti-climax Cambridge, its stuffiness and petty-fogging, proctor-controlled regulations!

Janet Sayers (Ibid, p 95)

After leaving Dartington Jenny and I worked for two terms at Kilquhanity House in Kirkcudbright, a pale imitation of Summerhill that appealed to neither of us, and then I got a job at Lawrence Weston Comprehensive School on the outskirts of Bristol, near Avonmouth.

I had little control over my classes. During my term and a half trying to teach there I would occasionally give out a detention, but then I had little control over the children I was detaining and my desperate day was only prolonged. If I had not already had two years loving teaching at Dartington I would have abandoned teaching altogether.

Jenny and I invited members of my tutor-group round to tea – something that was considered most eccentric. When I passed children I knew in the school corridors I

greeted them. This was peculiar to the point of being laughable. Yet the children were supportive, in their own way. One friendly boy said, 'Why don't you hit us, sir? Mr. Godwin hits us, and you can hear a pin drop in his class.'

It was not only Mr. Godwin who used unpleasant methods. Some teachers seemed to relish humiliating their pupils. I saw a group of four thirteen-year-old boys rehearsing a sketch they had prepared for an end-of-term party. Soon after they had started the teacher in charge stopped them by shouting out, angrily, from the back of the hall, 'Is this supposed to be funny?' Luckily the boys had an answer that fitted the situation. 'Not yet, Miss,' one of them called back. She allowed them to go on, and the sketch got funnier and funnier. Why had she found it necessary to interrupt, and to interrupt so aggressively?

In the dining room one day I heard another teacher, threatened I suppose by the behaviour of one particular girl, shout out, so that we could all hear, 'I know where your mother was last night!' Of course the children were frightened of anyone who could be so ruthless, and perhaps the teacher needed fear to establish her authority, but it seems extraordinary she could descend to such a base tactic.

I also had to be present at a beating at Lawrence Weston. I had experienced beating at Eton, and known about it at Repton, but it was the only beating I had actually seen since my prep-school days at Connaught House. This was after teaching at Dartington for two years, where I had seen a system in which all punishment was avoided. I was called in by the deputy head to sign the punishment book, because he was not allowed to beat a child without a witness. The culprit was a boy of about thirteen, small for his age, whose crime was swearing at some girls. The deputy head explained to me that his father was a long-distance lorry-driver and often away from home, and that he had picked up bad habits. When the boy came in he was cringing and terrified. At first he refused to bend down, and hid in the corner of the room, but he eventually came out and was given three or four strokes while he whimpered, flinched, cried out and tried to protect his bottom with his hands. I was extremely shocked. On the whole I admired the deputy head, but this seemed to me self-evidently a barbarous case of a powerful adult inflicting pain on a powerless child who needed above all some measure of the support and affection that he had not received from his family.

On one occasion the headmaster came into my class because he had noticed the noise as he walked past, and the faces of the children in the front row went white. I would have been appalled to inspire such terror.

I could not bear to go on trying to teach in a place where I was failing so badly, and anyway success generally seemed to depend on violence and fear, so I gave in my notice, rather to the headmaster's relief.

(I say 'generally seemed to depend on violence and fear' because there were some teachers who managed without either, including, most of the time, the deputy head whose beating I had been obliged to witness. I have always had the greatest admiration for such teachers, and feel humble at what they achieve.)

Perhaps it is unfair to think of routine school humiliation as deliberate. Some teachers may set about humiliation deliberately as a means of imposing discipline, like the man at Eton who screwed up my work and threw it into the bin, or the woman at Lawrence Weston who said she knew what that girl's mother had been doing the night before, but for many humiliation is just an inevitable part of schooling, which they endured themselves, and believe they have to impose on their pupils. The best manage to teach without it.

If children are going to be herded together into classes of thirty or more, all dressed alike, obliged to attend lessons in which they have no interest and compelled to sit still for hours on end when they are longing to play outside, teachers have to be prepared to act as prison warders, and since they are forbidden the use of solitary confinement and physical force they may resort to other means.

I have learnt, first from Dartington Hall School and then from Sands School and the many democratic schools around the world that I have visited, that there is no need for the herding or the uniform or the compulsion or the restriction. Repression breeds revolt, and results in sharper repression. The cycle must be broken, and the first necessary step is to treat children with a proper respect.

Examples have been set within the British state education system. I never visited Risinghill School, which opened new horizons in the early 1960s, but I knew Countesthorpe in the seventies, and I saw Highfield Junior School in the 1990s, when Lorna Farrington had transformed it by introducing such improvements as circle time, classroom rules made by the children themselves and pupil interviews for prospective staff. Room 13, the art room at Caol Primary School in Fort William is run by the children as an autonomous republic, independent of the school.

Risinghill was closed after only five years and Countesthorpe was transformed by a more authoritarian head teacher, but in June 2003 Room 13 won an award of £200,000 from the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts.

Change is not impossible.

The end of my unsuccessful few months in the state education system coincided with a sudden vacancy at Dartington Hall School. The French teacher in the Middle School, at Aller Park, was leaving at Christmas, and Lois Child rang me up to ask whether I would take his place.

After only eighteen months away Jenny and I were back.

I loved Aller Park, but it was not the same as the Senior School. I did not, for instance, feel as though I was the same age as the children. I was, after all, at least twenty years older than they were, a married man and a father.

In the evenings I went up to the Senior School again to rejoin the choir and the madrigal group and the play-reading group and the jazz band. Tim Moore and I wrote more musicals. Shortly after the beginning of my first term back at Dartington was the Senior School Valentine's Day party, and I was asked to MC. I had one of the best parties I can remember. I was able to express the joy that I felt at being back in a place that I loved.

My predecessor at Aller Park had had to leave in the middle of the school year because his manner with the children had resulted in rebellion in his classes. He would probably have succeeded at Lawrence Weston, where I failed. Perhaps for this very reason it was not at all a difficult position for me to step into. We had both been square pegs in round holes. I don't know whether he went on to teach successfully in more ordinary schools, but I certainly went on to teach successfully at Aller Park.

One of my early successes at a staff meeting was providing a solution to a problem that was bothering the house-parents. The children were eating so much bread and butter at morning break that when lunch-time came they were not hungry. People were suggesting authoritarian solutions, such as forbidding the eating of bread, but I suggested altering the timetable. Instead of three lessons, morning break and a double period before lunch, we should have a double period before break and three lessons afterwards. It worked.

I was less successful in defending the children from criticism when the domestic staff complained that they often found the lavatories in the boarding houses had not been flushed during the night. This was seen as not only unhygienic and dirty but also inconsiderate, because it made the lavatories more difficult to clean. My suggestion that the children did not flush the lavatories because they did not wish to wake others up was ignored.

I also launched a failed attack on the idea of sporting fixtures against other schools. One of the reasons I so approved of the school was that there was no competition; inter-school games would promote a competitive spirit. This time I was defending a theory rather than the interests of the children; at the next week's staff meeting Barry Cripps, the PE teacher, justified his proposals and I had to withdraw my objections.

There was a wide range of teaching styles, and mine was one of the less conventional. The laboratories were, of necessity, places of order. The science lab and my French classroom were at opposite ends of the building, so the science teacher and I knew little of each other's approaches. There was an impression that

classes became less and less formal as you moved along the corridor - science, maths, English, French. One of the housemothers reported to me the astonishment of Frank Smalley, the science teacher, when he heard a group of children discussing which class they worked hardest in, and deciding it was French. He had imagined that all we did was play. Yet both of us were well respected by the children and had a good relationship with them.

A later science teacher, Lesley Cooper, was equally strict about behaviour in the lab, and successfully demanded neat, well-labelled drawings and accurate notes. Even the most dyslexic child seemed able to achieve this in her classes, and to be pleased with and proud of the results.

Alice Hoare, one of the house-parents in the middle school used to allow her children to sleep wherever they wanted on the last night of the term, and there are photographs of sleepers in, for instance, a bath and a laundry-basket. She also maintained an extraordinary degree of order, apparently without demanding it. Her parents looked after her house for a few days while she was recovering after having a baby, and when she came back to the house, as her mother expressed it, 'suddenly all the wellingtons were tidily put away.' The atmosphere in the school allowed high standards and informality to exist side by side.

I would not hold up my own teaching style as a model, and indeed right until I retired from Sands it was full of mistakes, but I learnt from my blunders. Some of my experiments at Aller Park, for instance in the teaching of French, were at least attempts to do something different.

It had occurred to me that young children do not begin to speak their own language until they have heard other people speaking for a year or two. It seemed to me that comprehension should come before speech, and that writing could wait for a long time. There was at that time no programme of tapes or videos that made this approach possible, so I wrote a series of sketches of not more than a page or so, with limited vocabulary but as much humour as I could manage. The children heard the pronunciation of this vocabulary in a variety of contexts and were invited to act these sketches, reading the lines from duplicated sheets. I also tried to make sure that they understood every sentence. The vocabulary was simple but the grammar was colloquial - colloquial sentences, after all, can usually be understood from the context, particularly if the nouns, verbs and adjectives are all familiar.

These sketches formed the backbone of my course, but it also included various games and specially written songs. These songs were made up of useful phrases, and they were rounds, so that it was fun to sing them over and over again, or to compete in groups to see who could maintain their part for longest.

After a year of the plays my pupils were obliged to listen to a course on the radio, and to start doing old-fashioned grammatical work. The course was called 'Allons-

y', and the dialogue was pronounced rather than acted. Presumably the director thought that natural speech would be too difficult to understand. The corresponding third-year course was spoken naturally, and I was surprised to find that my less able pupils understood this more easily. It reminds me now that language does not consist only of words, it consists also of tones of voice. What is more, when you are talking to someone face to face body language is just as important as what is being said. It is only in the last year or two that I have discovered that it is much easier to speak French if you allow yourself to make plenty of gestures. Babies understand gestures and tones of voice long before they understand words; this obvious truth did not strike me until I had long given up teaching languages.

All through this second year we continued with the games and the songs, and when I meet former pupils from thirty years ago or so it is always the songs that they remember.

There was a period of a few years when the children were able to choose which classroom to go to during the afternoons. I invented a number of games for learning vocabulary and grammar, and I brought my collection of Tintin books down to the school. The system broke down in the end because the children only wanted to come to the English room or the French room. It had been a trifling experiment by comparison with much of what I have since seen in other schools, but it was a start.

French at Aller Park also raised a question in my mind as to how much children's learning depended on what went on in actually the classroom. I had a dictionary of basic French, which supposedly included the thousand commonest French words; I used it to give occasional tests using a random selection of these words so that each child could have some idea of his or her total vocabulary. I had one pupil who came from a prep-school where he had had to learn a list of words every week for years, and as he was doing well in my lessons I expected him to know many more words than my other pupils, who had never learnt any vocabulary lists in their lives. His vocabulary turned out to be only somewhat above average. Even more curious was the occasion when I gave my classes the same test at the end of the summer term and the beginning of the following term. Almost all of them did better after the holiday.

There was something I didn't like about teaching French. Most children love the first week or so of a foreign language, and then have a dull time for several years before they understand enough for it to become enjoyable again. (Most adults give up teach-yourself courses after the first couple of lessons.) All I seemed to be doing was trying to make a boring subject palatable. Teaching maths was helping people to understand, teaching English was helping people to express their own ideas, but teaching French was merely trying to install data in their memories.

When we already had two children of our own, Jenny took on short-term foster-children. When a load of logs was delivered to some elderly neighbours straight in

front of their garage while they were out, Jenny stacked the logs away before they got back. Every Sunday we had a group of boarders to tea, so that during the year we would have entertained all of them. If you were in another room and you heard Jenny talking to someone, you could not tell from her tone of voice whether she was talking to a two-year-old or an adult. A. S. Neill said he wanted above all that his pupils should be happy; Jenny wanted above all that our children should be kind.

She died after great pain from volvulus of the small intestine when she was twenty-four years old. I was in no state to look around carefully at her funeral, but I had the impression that the church was full.

Lois Child came round to my house several times to help to put the children to bed. I could not imagine any ordinary head teacher doing that. I was allowed to stay off work for as long as I felt I needed. Dartington was reminding me of one of the great lessons I had learnt from Jenny. People matter more than duty.

Recently I found an extract from a letter that I had imagined her writing to me shortly after she had died. 'Naked reality is love, and if people dared face it they would find this to be so. Do not forget to be what you are, to be real, to be naked, to be loving; never be ashamed. Always try. Always try.'

There had been three things that gave meaning to my life – Jenny, our children and my job. I still had two of them. A year later Lynette, who had been teaching the top group in the Junior School at Aller Park, accepted the children's proposal that she should be their new mother, and mine that she should be my wife, and once again we were a complete family.

A few years later I became the teacher for that same ten-year-old class. I was able to teach maths and English instead of nothing but French.

For a part of each day I decided that everyone in my class would have to work as a group, either with me or with a PE, music or art specialist. For the rest of the day they could choose what to do, although I required a session of maths from everyone at some point in the day.

I found the school had a set of Dienes blocks, a system that had been devised by a former pupil of the school and was supposed to make arithmetic easy by presenting it in a concrete form. I was enthusiastic about it, and at the beginning of the year I required everyone to work through a series of Dienes work-cards. Some children found them helpful, but Jenny Davey found them not merely unhelpful but actually distressing. She used to cry over those beastly little blocks of wood and instead of abandoning them and trying another approach I would try to help her to understand them. Everyone needs to be able to do basic arithmetic, but no one actually needs to be able to manipulate Dienes blocks. I had trapped myself into a compulsory curriculum just as pointless as the Latin I had had to learn at school myself.

When computers were first introduced into schools I became interested in early BASIC, the language that was used by our 16K and 32K Commodore PETs. My son Nathan and his friends at the senior school were already programming simple games, and Jason Handby, who was a pupil at Aller Park, also knew much more than I did. They helped me to learn. This was extraordinarily instructive: my young teachers and I worked together on the development of my use of BASIC, and I saw that this co-operative situation was an ideal to aim for in my own ordinary teaching. Even though I knew more about most school subjects than my pupils did, that did not make me superior to them, any more than their greater knowledge of programming made my young teachers superior to me. In areas where I was the one who knew most, my greater knowledge only meant that I was better able to help my pupils to learn than I might otherwise have been.

I learnt something else important about maths teaching later on when Lynette asked me to teach her how to program in BASIC. It was before commercially produced material was available, and she wanted to write programs for the children she was teaching who had specific learning difficulties.

The great difference between teaching children and teaching Lynette was that she was able to say, 'No, don't tell me about that. You are interrupting my train of thought.' I would see that she could make her program much simpler if she used some new command that I could show her, but she would resist because she was still in the process of mastering the commands she was just learning. Very few children are able to say no in this way, and very few teachers will pay any attention if they do. Nevertheless, as I saw with Lynette, this ability to say no is very important. Teachers are always trying to move their pupils along too fast, taking them outside their ZPD, and so not merely wasting time but actually preventing them from ever fully understanding what had been almost within their grasp. My own interest in history, for instance, was destroyed by having to learn dates, which were nothing more than numbers, in relation to treaties, laws and disputes which meant nothing to me. Giving too much information is distracting and confusing and can easily result in the learner being put off the subject for good.

Yet children often find themselves obliged to attempt tasks that for some reason or other they find impossible. The traditional approach, and the one that I adopted with my weeping mathematician, is to force them to attempt the task anyway. John Holt describes many examples of the uselessness of this in his book *How Children Fail*. Here is one of them:-

We did some work the other day on multiplication tables. The results were, to say the least, astonishing. The paper was marked in a grid of 10 x 10 squares, that is 100 squares arranged in ten rows, 10 squares in each row. Across the top row, and to the left of the left hand column, were written the numbers from 1 to 10, but in irregular order.

Thus every one of the 100 squares in the grid was in a numbered columns and a numbered row. If a square was in the row numbered 2 and the column numbered 3, the child was to put in the square the product of 2×3 , or 6. The square in the row numbered 5 and the column numbered 7 would therefore be filled with the number 35, and so on.

From Marjorie's paper, I got: $4 \times 6 = 22$, $4 \times 4 = 20$, $4 \times 7 = 32$. Then $10 \times 10 = 20$, and right beside it, $10 \times 2 = 22$. Then, side by side in the row numbered 8, $8 \times 8 = 48$, $8 \times 6 = 59$, $8 \times 4 = 40$, $8 \times 7 = 49$, $8 \times 9 = 42$. In the 7 row, $7 \times 5 = 35$, $7 \times 8 = 24$, $7 \times 7 = 47$, $7 \times 9 = 45$.

I'm not making this up, I swear it.

Is it enough to say of this child that she does not know her tables?

Holt, 1969, p 114

It is not possible to avoid making mistakes, but it is usually possible to avoid forcing children into situations where they are certain to fail. And when they do fail, it is possible to minimise or even remove the associated shame. When the magazine *Lib Ed* interviewed children from Summerhill about their experiences of the school, one of them commented with approval that at Summerhill it was all right to make mistakes.

Schools should make it possible for children to discover what they are good at and to enjoy doing it, but they must also make it possible for children to do what they enjoy doing even if they discover they are bad at it.

Most of the children in my class spent a lot of time writing stories. Usually they would know what they wanted to write about, but I discovered that when someone asked for an idea it was not so much an idea for a subject to use that was wanted, as a range of subjects to reject. 'Write about what it feels like to be a rabbit in a cage,' I might suggest, 'or getting up very early in the morning, or borrowing something from somebody and losing it, or a ghost story,' and then all at once the child would say, 'I know. I shall write a story about someone cooking a meal that goes all wrong.'

At first I did not understand the importance of finding out what a child already knows before launching out into whatever I wanted to teach (or whatever I thought others would expect me to be teaching). It became obvious to me after I had been spending some time enthusiastically telling my group about the exploration of the world by Europeans around the sixteenth century. We went to see the copy of Drake's ship at Brixham, and I read them extracts from books and talked about Columbus and the amazing journey across the Atlantic Ocean. And then I discovered that many of the ten-year-olds in the group had no idea where the Atlantic Ocean was. We adults find it strangely difficult to appreciate the fact that there is a great deal of information that we simply take for granted, and that children cannot know because they have never come across it at all. It is easy to recognise this

phenomenon when angry parents tell small children not to be stupid (or worse, naughty) when they have locked themselves by mistake into the public lavatory, or when they ask for food that they find they do not like, or in the desire to be helpful stack up the plates so that they fall and break, but it is harder to accept when the children are old enough to be articulate and deft.

Learning may be directed towards a distant target, but it has to start from where you are. It is little use knowing how to get to London from Colchester if you happen to be in Cardiff.

Another mistake I often made was preventing children from doing perfectly sensible things that they wanted to do. It struck me for the first time when a child asked me whether she could go outside and find a flower and bring it back to draw. 'No,' I said, although on what grounds I cannot now imagine. And then the next week I found myself sending the whole class out into the grounds to find flowers, bring them back and draw them.

I don't remember who it was that I had forbidden to go outside and find a flower, but I do remember interfering with a bit of research by Peter Nicholson, who now makes documentary films. I had brought various containers and tubes into the classroom so that everyone could find out about siphoning water from one container to another, and for several days they had a great time solving various problems. Then they all lost interest, except for Peter who wanted to go on and on. I'm afraid I probably told him to stop playing about. I certainly took all the equipment away.

Why on earth, I now wonder, did I feel I had to prevent him from carrying on with his interesting experiments? Why couldn't I share in his interest? I obviously must have thought that he was wasting his time, but I hadn't even bothered to find out what was going on in his mind. It was an opportunity lost.

And I remember two girls who always wanted to make up plays together. They would go off to another room to rehearse and after a while would invite me to come and see what they had been practising. It was always a plotless domestic scene – going shopping, doing the ironing, going for a picnic, putting the baby to bed – and I thought that if they were going to spend their time making up plays, at least they should be about something more interesting. Not, of course, something more interesting to them, because they were interested already, but something more interesting to me. They were playing when they should have been working, I thought. So I stopped that, too.

As I look back now, I see at least two reasons why I should have allowed them to continue: firstly, the drama work they were doing was probably necessary for them because they must have missed appropriate play when they were much younger, and secondly, they had found something they wanted to work on with concentration for some length of time – which seldom happened in the classroom.

There was another science experiment that I stopped, but in this case with some justification. I had invited the children to connect up batteries and bulbs in various ways, to see what happened, and some boys had discovered that if you connected enough batteries in parallel you could blow the bulbs. It was interesting, but it was too expensive. I would have liked to allow the boys to carry on with their experiments, but we ran out of bulbs.

Much the best time I had with science was when I noticed that the boys at the back of the room were more interested in the wobbly pencil illusion than whatever it was I was trying to explain. They were holding pencils loosely by one end and shaking them gently up and down so that they appeared to be bending.

I stopped explaining whatever it was and invited everyone to watch the apparently bendy pencils. Everybody was interested, and we then went through what I believe to have been a genuine scientific experience. None of us knew why the pencil appeared to bend, so we thought of a number of hypotheses. (I hate teachers saying 'we' when they mean either 'they' or 'I', but in this case we really were all working together.) 'It's because of the hand going up and down,' was one hypothesis, and another was, 'It's because your two eyes see different images,' and a third, 'The pencil really does bend.'

People then devised experiments to test these hypotheses, and they were all rejected. At last someone came up with a new hypothesis that seemed convincing, but we needed a cine-camera to test it, and we did not have one. This last hypothesis, which was not mine, was that the eye retains an image of the pencil in different positions for a short period of time, so you get the same sort of curve as you can make winding string on a pin-board, or drawing straight lines between, for instance, these pairs of points on a graph: 0,0 to 10,6, 0,5 to 10,4, 0,2 to 10,2, 0,4 to 10, 0,5 and 0,6 to 10,0 for the pencil going one way, and 0, 5.5 to 10,2, 0,4 to 10,4 and 0,2 to 10, 5.5 on the way back.

The significant thing about this work, which went on for more than a day, was that I did not know the answer to the problem, and it was not I who found the probable solution.

I loved activities like 'Express Writing', which meant writing as much as possible about a given topic in two minutes and then, if you wanted, reading out what you had written, which was often entertainingly nonsensical. This would melt away the most intractable of writer's blocks, and I think everyone enjoyed it. And I loved 'Impossible Riddles', which had no known answers; riddles like 'Why don't pigs eat blackboards?' or 'What is the difference between Tuesday and a parachute?' A group of fifteen or twenty children would find plenty of interesting answers. And then there was 'As Many as Possible', which was the same game as 'Names, places, animals' except that the headings for the columns might be 'Things that fit in a

matchbox,' 'Places to hide a grandfather clock' or 'Things to say to someone who says, "You're mad."' (If you have been reading this book carefully you will recognise this last topic.) I think the children enjoyed these activities too.

And I loved the children's stories and poetry. One of the achievements I most prized was *The Boring Book*, which consisted of the work the children had produced when they were trying to write as boringly as possible. I had to omit the most boring composition of all, which was on 'The Front page of my Exercise Book' and was so long and so boring that I couldn't even force myself to read more than the first page and a half, let alone type the whole thing out for publication. Other contributions, such as 'Out for a picnic' and 'A paper hanky' managed somehow to be boring and brief at the same time.

The two most important events of each year were the plays and the summer camps.

The plays, which would include everyone in the junior school, so about forty or fifty children, were originally devised entirely by me, but as the years went by they were more and more based on the children's own ideas, and the dialogue was always extemporised. Songs would have some words by the children and some by me, and the music, nearly always by me, would be specially written so that it was easy for particular children to perform. (It was not always so easy for adults; I remember one music teacher shocked that her daughter was expected to sing a song in 5/4, and a violin teacher appalled that her pupils were expected to play a double sharp, not realising that I was expecting them to perform without ever having seen the music written down. The boy who had to play a piano accompaniment with six flats didn't know it had six flats; he only knew it was all on the black notes.)

I could rehearse sensibly with my own group, but the younger children would get wildly excited and I was lost with them. Their own teachers had to come to rehearsals to support me.

I don't know why plays are so important and children generally love them so much, even though I too have always loved plays and loved acting. I know that the best performances I have seen by younger children have always been those with the most extemporisation, and that even teenagers, who are capable of wonderful performances from learnt scripts, can also often be heard reciting their lines woodenly with minimal understanding. Drama courses offer opportunities for many kinds of learning, but the delight of performing seems to be an end in itself; a school play is an artistic creation, not an educational exercise.

It was while children were painting the scenery for a nativity play that I was directing that I learnt something very important from Bernie Forrester, the potter, who was teaching art at Aller Park at the time. He refused to run compulsory art classes, but always had the art room full whenever he was available. I went in one

evening to see the scenery the children were painting. While I was there one of them turned to Bernie and said, 'Shall I paint this roof gold?' I would have found it hard not to express an opinion, but what Bernie said was, 'Try it and see how it looks.'

This ability to stand back and trust in the children's own judgement is something that I have learnt to value more and more highly.

Of course I tried, personally, not to humiliate any child, but I did not always succeed. Some of the games I introduced into French lessons showed up the less able. Even when I was teaching general subjects in my junior school class I could not disguise the fact that some people did better in my lessons than others. For some of them it must have been very like the situation I found myself as a pupil in PE classes.

When I had been at school I had felt like a third-class citizen – the first class were the staff, the second class were the other boys, and I was the third class. At Dartington I don't think anyone felt like that. Late one winter evening I drove to fetch my son Nathan from the senior school, because he had a leg in plaster. I was waiting by the second courtyard, where there was a narrow path between the boarding-houses and the art room. The only light came from the windows of the overlooking rooms. A bunch of large, alarming-looking adolescent boys were in conversation in the middle of the path when a young girl came out of the art room and began to walk towards the boarding houses. I wondered what would happen when she reached the group, and admired her courage as she approached them. They all stepped off the path to allow her to pass.

I never expected anyone to step off a path for me.

Jenifer Smith taught at Aller Park for two years before moving on to Countesthorpe College in Leicester. In the thesis which she later wrote for her M. Phil at Southampton University she listed some of the things she had learnt with us.

I saw how it was to be with children in a peaceful, open way.

I saw an easiness between adults and children.

I saw adults treat children who had behaved terribly badly with a firmness and compassion and fairness that supported and nourished and did not condemn.

I saw adults and children engrossed in conversation; sharing joyful activity, music making, flying kites, canoeing, camping; I saw them engaged in serious pursuits together, badger-watching, taking pinhole photographs, keeping bees, each learning from the other.

And I had a chance to do these things myself.

I also saw adults able to step back and allow children to engage in their own pursuits without adult interference.

Despite all kinds of sophistication, children seemed able to be children for longer.

At Dartington children directly challenged me and my assumptions and I had to recognise their criticisms and answer properly.

I found the children were genuinely interested in what I had to say even if they didn't always agree with me. I found children appreciating me despite our differences and I felt honoured by them.

I found the children genuinely good company.

Smith, 1989, p 21

Anyone who can feel honoured by the appreciation of children understands the Dartington ethos.

Camping, as organised at Aller Park, was definitely an educational experience, but of a very different kind to that experienced by children whose 'camps' are in brick buildings and involve supervised courses in archery, swimming, tennis or archaeology. For a week the children would sleep in individual tents in a field by the sea, with a stream for washing-up water and drinking-water brought from a spring a quarter of a mile away. There was a chemical toilet behind a canvas screen, and a big staff fire-place where water was heated for washing and washing-up. A store of food was kept in a bell-tent, and a stack of skimmings from the Dartington timber-yard would be left just outside the gate. The children would chop wood for their own camp fires where they would cook their own meals, and they would swim and play on the beach, make packed lunches and go for long walks along the coast. It seems to be an almost universal wish among ten-year-olds to light their own fires and cook their own food, and they want to learn how to do it with an eagerness driven by hunger. Helping a boy who has failed to light his fire is very different from helping him to solve a maths problem. He is the one who needs the fire, not you, and he needs it now, and he is determined that the next time he will know how to do it on his own.

The weather sometimes makes camping difficult and sometimes makes it exquisite. The experience of the necessity of keeping yourself warm and keeping your clothes and bedding dry is nothing to do with teaching and everything to do with learning.

Camps used to run from Friday to Friday, and the only day that was always uncomfortable at camp was the Sunday, when parents were invited to come and visit. Everyone had to hang around the camp-site, waiting for them to arrive. Those who had been feeling a little homesick would suddenly feel extremely homesick. Parents might officiously tidy their children's tents, or chop wood for them, or else pay them no attention and sit by the staff fire waiting to be offered cups of tea. Most had no idea of the intensity of their children's experience, and the importance of their sense of independence. Only the best would notice that we needed a communal

washing-line and fix one up, or fetch wood for the staff fire, or repair the guy-ropes on the bell-tent.

Although the children were safe, in that they were supervised by a group of adults, had food put out for them to cook when meal-times came and had to obey strict rules about bathing in the sea, they had to exercise an independence that very few ever had at home or on holidays. They had to look after their own belongings, wash up their own dishes and cooking-pots, keep dry and warm, avoid sunburn, perhaps collect driftwood as kindling because it burnt better than the skimmings, perhaps plan something more adventurous to cook, sleep alone, find things to do, perhaps build a table from odd bits of wood, choose their own sandwich ingredients when they made their packed lunches, pack their own rucksacks for expeditions. There would be energetic games followed by singing and story by the camp fire every evening and on two or three days there would be organised expeditions or whole-day adventure games or survival exercises, but that left long days when you had to decide what you wanted to do and who you were going to do it with.

And at the foot of the cliff there was the sea, and in either direction along the coast scenes of great beauty.

This was a learning situation of the highest order.

Of all my happy memories of Aller Park, one of the happiest is driving back from one particular camp with a vanful of singing, radiant children. I also remember countless Aller Park plays, and particular performances in plays – Natasha Palmer, aged six, as the doll in a musical box, popping up when the lid was opened and playing the accordion, Ivana Citkowitz, who had been granted a million wishes, crying out 'I wish you were all dead!' and reacting in horror as the boys who had been teasing her began to collapse, one after the other, Hugh Milburn as a victim of bullying, desperate as Marc Blessington stamped on his teddy bear, Jenny Davey as a house-wife and mother of five singing the list of things she wished she could afford to buy.

I remember the way many of the children loved the plays so much that they sat and watched through rehearsal after rehearsal, and even tried to slip out into the audience during performances.

I remember the excitement I felt at the first Aller Park party I attended. I remember the delight of reading aloud to children who were delighted to listen. I remember the swimming-pool. I remember the first Aller Park jazz band. I remember children dancing.

And I think the children had even more fun than the adults did. Here are some more snatches from *That's All, Folks*.

To this day I feel very lucky to have experienced two wonderful, very happy years at Aller Park. Just the thought of AP makes me smile inside.

Natalie Cook (in Gribble, 1987, p 168)

I can remember my first impressions of Aller Park once I'd settled in. They were a mixture of complete joy, freedom and independence. . . I became aware that I was a child and I was able to respond as a child would respond.

Alice Leach (Ibid, p 173)

Aller Park were the best days of my fourteen years that I've been alive. We were all too happy to get depressed. We were all so full of energy we never slowed down.

Nik Kenny (Ibid p 182)

I had over a quarter of a century of good experiences at Dartington which helped me to clarify my ideas about education. My time there ended with a different kind of learning experience; before Dartington I had known what it was to be cowed, humiliated and beaten, but never actually insulted.

I was insulted by the closing of Dartington Hall School.

I had taught there for almost thirty years, I had learnt to understand it from Jenny, my four children had been educated there and I was head of Aller Park. Half my life had been spent there and I felt that I loved it and understood it as few other people did who had not been pupils there themselves. I had imagined that I knew several of the Trustees as friends. The only Trustee who asked my opinion was Michael Young, and he asked it too late.

For one term only, the school suffered under the reign of a hostile headmaster appointed by the Trustees. He had no understanding of the ethos of the school and made one mistake after another, which finally resulted in daily headlines in the tabloids for most of the summer. The staff passed a vote of no confidence in him, but the Trustees refused to accept it. He resigned when the *Sun* newspaper discovered that he and his wife had posed for pornographic photographs. Dartington then became known as the school with the porn-model head, and it never recovered.

When it was announced, without consultation with pupils, staff, parents or even the Board of Governors, that the school was to close, the pupils demanded a meeting with the Trustees; the meeting took place, but it had no effect. A historic school, which had led the way in demonstrating the success of democracy and freedom in education, was closed by an authoritarian decision by taken by people who did not understand its excellence. What is worse is that it was closed in an inappropriate atmosphere of scandal and failure.

I wept over the closure of the school, as did many others, adults and children, and not only present pupils but past pupils as well.

After years of enjoying consultation and some measure of democracy, I saw the kind of disdainful authority I had suffered under in my own schooling destroy all I

stood for. Once again I saw with horror that, as I wrote in my list of lessons learnt at Eton, authority gives you the right to be wrong.

CHAPTER FIVE

SANDS SCHOOL

Park School, a junior school to continue in the Dartington tradition, had been founded by my wife, Lynette, and a group of parents and teachers when Dartington Hall School closed its junior section in 1986. A year later the senior school was closed, leaving a group of children behind who did not want to be sent to more conventional schools. Sybilla Higgs, Sean Bellamy and I, three of their teachers, worked with them to produce a new school which would have broadly the same approach as Dartington, but which could never be killed off by a board of trustees who did not understand it. It was to be entirely under the control of the students and staff who worked there.

By law Sands had to have a Board of Governors, but we made as sure as possible that it could not be closed down as Dartington had been. The Sands Instrument of Government includes the sentence, 'Due regard shall be taken by the Governors of the views and wishes of the School Community of staff and pupils on all matters relating to the management, conduct and underlying philosophy of the School and to behaviour in the School.' There is ambiguity about the phrase 'due regard', but at Sands this sentence is taken to mean that no decisions are valid if they go against the wishes of the school meeting.

We started Sands without a building. Becky White, whose three elder siblings had all been to Dartington, was determined that she was going to have a similar education. Her parents allowed us to start the school on the ground floor of their house, on the condition that every evening everything was restored to order.

On the morning of the first day, before anyone had been asked to do anything, a thirteen-year-old boy who had not learnt to read at his previous school laid his head on the table where he was sitting and cried. I think it was because he felt himself thrust into a new situation where his old failure would be repeated. This was not necessary at Sands. With Sybilla's help he began to make up lost ground, and though he did not immediately turn into a good reader he found he was respected for himself anyway. We are not all equally good at everything, and there is no point in pretending that we are. At Sands it was understood that being good at school subjects or good at games is not important for everyone. There are many qualities such as self-respect, concern for others and sheer happiness that matter infinitely more.

A group of supportive parents and friends of the school helped to look for an appropriate building. Site after site was rejected, either because it was unsuitable or because planning permission could not be granted for change of use. Then, by an

extraordinary stroke of luck, we found that the caretakers of a building called Greylands, in Ashburton, were showing round people interested in buying it. It had formerly been Ashburton High School for Girls, and had also housed a Steiner school and was still registered for educational use. It was a beautiful house with a wonderful, large garden and several outhouses, but I thought the rooms were too small and that many of the rooms were too dark. Nevertheless we invited all our students to visit it, and at the school meeting after the visit there was almost unanimous enthusiasm. My doubts were overridden, and we approached the owner. His first reaction was to ask how we knew that he was thinking of selling; apparently the caretakers had been acting entirely on their own initiative. His second reaction was to approve of the idea of selling to a school, and with the help of a large bank loan we were able to buy.

The very smallest rooms turned out to be divided by plasterboard partitions, which were soon demolished, and the building has been a great success. Sands had taught me one of its first lessons about the wisdom of consulting with its students.

To begin with, though, I felt that Sands was bound to be a second-best, because it was so small. We could not afford the range of specialist staff and equipment that Dartington Hall School had provided. I was, for example, the maths teacher, the French teacher and the drama teacher, and I was running the rather primitive jazz band.

As the school has grown so the facilities and the staff have grown with it, but it is still small and impoverished by comparison with Dartington; the staff are underpaid, the sports court needs refurbishment, there is no orchestra or choir and school plays are performed in a classroom where there is a tiny stage and room for only about forty in the audience.

However, in other ways the school has surpassed Dartington. At the discussions we had before the school opened the two powers the students most wanted were the power to appoint or dismiss staff, and the power to admit or reject applicants for places. At Dartington the students had neither of these powers. At Sands their decisions have justified the confidence placed in them. There have been occasions when members of staff might have been dismissed by a conventional head, and the school meeting has refused to accept the advice of the administrator. Except in one case, when the teacher chose to leave, those involved have been invaluable to the school.

At Dartington a specific restriction to the power of the pupils was that they were not allowed to make decisions that related to health or safety. No such restriction applies at Sands. It has always seemed to me that such questions are among those which are most likely to be decided sensibly by children; their health and safety naturally matter to them. (When I was at Aller Park, for instance, there was adult

concern about a fashion for racing bicycles up a low ramp and jumping over the prostrate bodies of volunteers; after a long discussion the bicyclists decided that the trick must only be done on grass, and that long jumps over more than one person were too dangerous. When I arrived at Foxhole there was a so-called health-and-safety rule that no one could carry a firework in a pocket; this was because, at some time in the past, a pupil had suffered bad burns as a result of a firework in his pocket accidentally exploding. The bicycle-jumping rules seems to me to be sensible, if slightly stricter than necessary, but the adult-decided rule about fireworks seems to have crossed the line between safety and neurosis – who else has ever heard of an accident involving a firework going off in somebody's pocket?)

When there have been crises over the actions of particular individuals or groups at Sands the School Meeting has been able to find a way through. I, and I know some other staff, were often near to tears at the wisdom and generosity shown by the children in such situations. The structure at Dartington did not allow any opportunity for such behaviour.

Dartington had few rules, but at one of the very first school meetings at Sands a boy called Andrew Edwards formulated the declaration that the school depends on common sense rather than rules. We started with only two rules – no alcohol and no drugs – but very soon the students who wanted to smoke suggested a third rule: smoking should only be permitted out of doors. When we moved to our own premises smokers were confined to the lower half of the garden, beyond a barrier of bushes. As the school has grown, so has the number of rules – there, for instance, half-a-dozen rules about water-fights – but common sense is still the justification for them, and if they prove unreasonable or unnecessary they can be altered or dropped.

The Trustees of Dartington had declared that there was no longer any demand for a school with this kind of philosophy, but in some years Sands has had almost twice as many day-students in each year-group as Dartington Hall School had. Park School and Sands School have been running now for fifteen years and more. The demand for this kind of education has been growing ever since the Dartington Trustees decided that it was out of date.

For the first year or two I was the head teacher, but I am not head teacher material. I don't like imposing myself, and at Sands there was no need to. All important decisions were made by the school meeting, and what I had to do was to see that these were duly carried out. At my own suggestion my title was changed from 'head teacher' to 'administrator.'

Many teachers who have known only rule-based schools find it hard to adjust to Andrew Edwards' idea of depending on common sense. Some want to exert authority instead of appealing to reason. If they have differences of opinion with

children they expect their opinions to be accepted as a matter of discipline. If a newcomer to the staff at Sands takes this attitude, the expectation in itself creates conflict; the children are used to co-operating and are offended by the assumption that they do not wish to do so. For teachers who understand the system it is a relief not to have to attempt to impose their will. Some adults find the resulting atmosphere bewildering, but most children understand it immediately. The system evolved according to the wishes of other children before them, and to a child it seems entirely sensible. The staff who stay long enough to appreciate it, stay on and on, in spite of the small salaries.

Some visitors are delighted by the informal helpfulness of the students, and others are offended by the way that students may pay no attention when they come into the room; they see the acknowledgement of their presence as ordinary courtesy, but when people are always going in and out of the room the children do not see the entry of one more person as a reason to interrupt their own conversations or work or games. I had seen this attitude before in my cousins' house at Glemham, where there was so much coming and going that adults behaved in the same way, and occasionally caused similar offence.

At Sands students treat visitors as they treat each other, addressing them as equals, pushing past them with a cursory 'Excuse me' if they are chasing or being chased, helping them to find what they need if they are at a loss. They often answer the telephone in the school office.

The most important events at Sands are the weekly school meetings. They discuss the timetable, rules, useful work, expeditions, appointment of staff, admission of new pupils, problems of behaviour, stolen property, visits from schools from other countries, involvement of parents, plans for the future. They are chaired by a pupil and are sometimes rowdy, but the rowdiness is as nothing compared to the House of Commons.

It was from the school meetings at Sands that I learnt most.

In the early days, when I was still described as the head teacher, we had a pupil who was causing serious anxiety. He was eleven or twelve years old, and had come to Sands because he had been so frightened and unhappy at his local school. At Sands he continued to be frightened and unhappy for much of the time, and when he thought he was threatened he would defend himself by throwing stones or picking up weapons. He never actually hurt anybody, which suggests that he did not mean to do so, but one day there were three incidents; I don't remember exactly what they were, but he had been known to pursue someone with a metal metre ruler and on another occasion with an electric drill. On this day I did something that the school constitution did not allow me to do: I rang up his parents and asked them to take him home. They duly came and fetched him and I called a school meeting to tell

the school what I had done and to ask whether we should allow him to come back. To my amazement, the feeling of the meeting was very strongly that he should come back, and that more effort should be made to make him feel at home. "We have not been being nice enough to him," one pupil said. He came back, and the students tried to be nicer to him, but he still did not trust them, and his behaviour did not improve. Eventually I made contact with the local child psychiatrist and arranged for his parents to take him away. I persuaded myself that I had to make the decision on my own, because there were some decisions that were just too difficult to ask children to take. I felt I had coped with the situation sensibly.

A year or so later we had three thirteen-year-olds who removed all the petty cash from the school office, took a bus to a nearby town, stole a torch and some other small items from shops and then went to the railway station and tried to buy tickets to York. When they found that they had not got enough money to buy tickets to York, they asked for tickets to Brighton. The ticket clerk was suspicious and called the police, the police fetched them and took them to the police station and rang up the school to tell us to collect them. I drove there at once, and they were so relieved to get away from the police that they got into my car without question.

On the way home I stopped in a lay-by and turned round to the three children on the back seat to try to find out how they were feeling. They were feeling furiously negative. They had intended to run away from home because they hated their families. They hated the school. They hated the other students. They hated the staff. It all burst out of them with a stream of obscenities.

I could not make any contact with them at all, so I drove back to school, where they announced that they were calling a school meeting because they did not want me telling a lot of fucking lies about them. The school meeting was called, and everybody came. As soon as the room was quiet the leader of the three described exactly what they had done, and ended by saying, "Now are you going to expel us?"

At first the meeting was indignant, shocked not so much by the fact that they had done these things, but that there had been no shame expressed and no apology offered. Then Sean Bellamy (who when I retired a few years later took over my role as administrator) suggested that anger and criticism were not the way forward, and it would be better if everyone remained calm.

After that none of the adults in the room spoke for about an hour. The other students asked the delinquents why they had done what they did, how they felt about it, and in the end whether they actually wanted to stay at the school. To my surprise, all three wanted to stay, and a vote was taken for each one, to see whether they should be allowed to. Conditions were made, but all three were allowed to stay. They were suspended for a week, and during that week they had to come in with their parents and discuss the situation with a group of two students and one adult.

The school meeting had resolved a situation in which I, with over thirty years experience, had been completely baffled. When I had arrived back with my swearing car-load, I had had no idea what to do at all. This made me think that perhaps I had not been so clever with the boy in my first story. Perhaps if he had been at the school meeting and heard the general agreement that people had not been nice enough to him he might have understood a great deal better than he understood the message that I passed on to him. Perhaps the students would have found a solution to the problem that had seemed to me intractable.

A group of children and adults, talking together, is bound to find wiser solutions to problems than a small group of adults, or worse still a single adult, deciding alone. This seems to me now so obvious that I cannot understand why I had not always known it.

Until the two events I have just described I had believed that there were some situations in which it would be better if a head teacher took individual responsibility. Afterwards I was sure that I had been wrong.

The school meeting is often more forgiving than an adult or a group of adults would be, but this gentleness is usually wise. Children find ingenious ways to avoid harshness. One successful ex-pupil who had several times been treated with extraordinary generosity by the school meeting after incidents of apparently malicious theft told me, 'If it had not been for Sands I would have been in prison by now.'

I learnt most from Sands when things went wrong. I could tell many more stories about students who had been unhappy at other schools, one to the point of attempting suicide, who came to Sands and found a new joy in life and made real successes of their education. I could mention the dyspraxic who has gone to university, the Asperger's syndrome that has become almost unnoticeable, the boy in the wheel-chair joining in with basket-ball and many more, but such stories would suggest that Sands is a school for students with problems.

The stories about happy, purposeful students who go through the school successfully and are now leading happy adult lives are not so interesting, but they form the majority. Sybilla has suggested that the happiness of these students is infectious, and it is that in itself that helps the students with difficulties. Not everyone is suited by Sands, but it suits far more people than could conceivably be suited by any authoritarian school with a monolithic curriculum.

By the end of my five years there I still mourned for Dartington, but I felt that in some ways Sands was an even better school. I had learnt to trust children more completely, and to trust them not just to come to decisions that I approved of, but also to surprise me and to make me change my mind. At the school meeting everyone has one vote, regardless of age, and no one has a veto. The building and

the grounds, though mortgaged, belong to the school, not to some outside body which can take them back. Visiting adults who have attended school meetings have often been struck by the way the students take their ownership for granted. The meeting does not make suggestions, it takes decisions. Adults are respected for their experience, but in any discussion that experience is only one ingredient among many. Where there is disagreement there are usually adults and students on both sides.

Occasionally there have been meetings from which adults have been excluded. The decisions made there have been just as effective as those made at the full school meetings, and they have generally been made much more quickly. To make a generalisation, adults are inclined to see discussions as competitive, and to restate their opinions even after they have been rejected by the majority; they are more interested in establishing the importance of their own points of view than in considering anyone else's. Children at a school like Sands are primarily interested in finding solutions to problems, and waste less time.

I saw a devastatingly clear demonstration of this some years later at an IDEC (International Democratic Education Conference) at Summerhill. To show how a Summerhill school meeting worked, the participants, who were nearly all adults, were invited at the first session to make their own rules for the few days they were to be there. Someone proposed that there should be no noise after ten o'clock at night. Someone else said that eleven o'clock would be better. Others took sides, or argued for half past ten as a compromise. It went on for almost an hour. I can't actually remember how it ended, except that it became clear that no consensus was in sight, so the discussion was abandoned. Any group of children from Summerhill or Sands would have settled the question in a few minutes.

My style of teaching had developed while I was at Dartington, but at Sands I learnt little new. Teaching methods are not central to the school's philosophy. What I learnt there was more to do with trust and personal relationships. However I did see one confirmation of a basic truth about teaching that made a strong impression on me. Before he began working at the school my son Nathan, who was an enthusiastic climber, agreed to take a group of Sands children climbing at Hay Tor. I drove them out there in the school minibus, and saw what happened. When they arrived he whisked up the face of a rock, fixed some protection and lowered himself back to the ground. Then he asked who wanted to try the climb, and everyone wanted to. He chose someone to go first, showed him how to attach his safety harness and stood back. He did not offer a single word of advice until it was requested. It was requested surprisingly soon, and extremely emphatically.

Most teachers are convinced that they must teach children how to do something "properly" before they allow them to try to do it their own way. Would-be carpenters, for instance, often have to learn to make joints before they have anything

to joint together. If only their teachers had the patience to wait to be asked for advice they would learn far more earnestly and with a great deal more pleasure. If what children were doing in the classroom was something they wanted to do really badly, they would be clamouring for help when they met difficulties.

The first teaching I saw that approached this situation was not at Sands, but at Countesthorpe College in Leicester in the 1970s. There were fourteen hundred students there, aged between fourteen and eighteen, and below the sixth form every one had an individual timetable. Almost all, if not all, these timetables were different. Some subjects were taught in classes behind closed doors in the ordinary way, but what was special to Countesthorpe was 'team time,' when pupils were under the supervision of a team of teachers, but each one of them was working independently on a topic of personal choice. 'Personal choice' is too weak a description – they were topics of absorbing interest to the particular people working on them, for instance the grand-daughter of a market stall-holder recording his memories, a boy writing a play to be performed in the local primary schools, a girl studying racism so that she would know what to say when people expressed racist views, a boy concerned for the environment photographing examples of pollution, a girl describing her work with mentally handicapped children.

Both at Dartington and at Sands I tried to recreate this situation, but although I think I sometimes helped people to write imaginatively about their own ideas, I never matched Countesthorpe's success with factual work. The only time I even saw how well it might work in my classes was when Hannah Roberts chose to describe an accident in which she had been hurt. She had been in a bus on the way to school; another vehicle had scraped against the side of it, breaking some windows, and she had been injured by the broken glass. Previously she had found it difficult to write at any length, but about this incident she wrote several pages, and, to my great surprise, her spelling had miraculously improved. She never actually finished the story, but what she had written obviously gave her great satisfaction, and showed me the importance of allowing children to work at topics that interest them.

Other teachers at Sands – Sybilla Higgs in her English classes, and Steve Hoare in the art room in particular – have succeeded in doing this, but they have had to work largely within a normal timetable.

What I did learn at Sands, in relation to teaching, was a little about the differences between what the teachers did there and what happened at other schools.

At one time one of the requirements for the GCSE English coursework was that candidates should write a set of instructions. At Sands the students chose to write about things that they knew from personal experience, and everyone chose a different topic; one girl, for instance, whose hair was sometimes scarlet and sometimes blue, gave instructions as to how to dye your hair. When Sybilla went to

a moderation meeting, where teachers from different schools compared and adjusted their marking, she was extremely impressed by one candidate's account of how to put up a tent, illustrated by a series of photographs. She then looked at the next candidate from the same school, and found another account of how to put up a tent, illustrated by the same photographs.

Every candidate from that school had been set the same exercise, and given the same pictures. The teacher had made it as easy as possible for the candidates to do what was required and get a good mark, regardless of whether the work was of any interest to them. Sybilla had encouraged all her pupils individually to adapt the examination requirements to suit themselves. This was not so much an issue of teaching method as of respect for the individual student.

For three years I taught GCSE Drama, which meant that every year I visited another school to see the work they were doing and to approve the staff's assessments, and someone from another school came to see what we had been doing and to approve mine. What I saw, in each of the three schools I visited, was students exercising their own imagination, creating a huge variety of dramatic pieces that were entirely their own, thoroughly enjoying themselves and working with concentration and commitment. I saw one teacher who achieved this with a class of sixty, working in a gymnasium.

It is not necessary, even in a conventional setting, to insist on every student doing exactly the same thing.

The degree of conventionality outside the drama classes in one of these schools was illustrated during my visit there. To get to the drama hall I had to walk along corridors lined with windows into classrooms where children sat in rows at desks. And then, when I arrived, I found myself with a group of young people who seemed lively, self-confident and individual. I immediately felt I liked them, and that they were more interesting than the children I had met at other schools. It was not until I was taken to the staff-room for a coffee-break that I realised what had made the difference. A senior teacher approached the drama teacher, my host, and indignantly asked him what authority he had had to allow his pupils to come to school in their own clothes, and not in uniform. He had stopped some of these children to tell them off, and had been told that they had special permission. He felt he had been made to look foolish, and he was angry. He gave no weight to the drama teacher's excuses that the children were having a full day of drama for the moderation and so would not be working under any other teacher, and that they felt less inhibited in their own clothes and were therefore able to involve themselves more completely in the work.

For the angry teacher, at least, uniform rules were more important than helping children to work well.

Supporters of school uniforms sometimes argue that it doesn't make any difference to the children whether they wear uniform or not. This drama teacher would not have agreed.

Nor would Rachel Roberts, a Sands School pupil who had to wait for the school bus outside the entrance to the Totnes Community College, which at that time still had a school uniform. I asked her whether she was not embarrassed to stand alone there while crowds of people, very differently dressed, swept past her. 'Oh no,' she said. 'It's *them* who are wearing uniform.'

Most adolescents hate uniform. They hate it because it doesn't suit them. They hate it because it makes them look like school-children and they are ashamed of being school-children. They hate it because they want to distinguish themselves, or to identify themselves with particular groups, and decorating your school bag is a poor substitute for wearing your own clothes. They hate it because it is compulsory. They hate it because it makes them feel they look stupid.

Yet uniform rules are so powerful that they can result in children being excluded from school altogether. At Lawrence Weston there was a boy in my group who could not come to school for a while because his mother could not afford to buy him any school trousers. That was many years ago, but I read recently about 22 children being separated from other pupils at Wessex Community School in Cheddar as a punishment for wearing plain blazers bought in a supermarket instead of the regulation blazers with the school crest, which cost £9 more. One of the comments made by a student when Totnes Community College dropped its uniform rules was that the contacts between staff and pupils had become much more often positive: beforehand they had been mostly concerned with petty infractions of the rules about dress.

Sands avoids all such problems. Rowan Reid was not allowed into her comprehensive school unless she wore school uniform and forsook her dreadlocks, so she came to Sands, wore dreadlocks for a while and then adopted a more conventional appearance. Livvy Croce came because her school refused to allow her to wear a nose-stud. After a year or so at Sands she abandoned the nose-stud because she no longer liked it.

There is a great variety of approach among the staff. Tim Currant, the chair of the governors, a professional team-builder in the world of business, offered his services to the school staff, but found the range of opinion so wide that there was little he could do. There was a universal commitment to the welfare of the students, but no agreement as to how it should be achieved. And yet when you see Sands as what it is, a community of people of different ages working together, it has a cohesion that adults find difficult to define, but children usually recognise immediately.

There is perhaps a clue to be found in Carol Gilligan's theories about the difference between a typically male and a typically female attitude to morality. As she explains in her book, *In a Different Voice*, most men rely on a morality of rules, and most women are motivated by a morality of caring. Men have dominated education for so long that it is difficult to recognise a morality of caring when it crops up in a school. Luckily few of the people who have worked at Sands, men or women, have had that difficulty.

I retired from Sands after five years, when I was sixty. The rest of the staff could accept me as a person who lived in their world, but to the students I was grandparent age – someone to like well enough, but not someone who shared their interests. I felt that I had too much influence on the staff and too little in common with the students. I could dispel a group of students merely by sitting with them and joining in the conversation.

This was curious, because when I visit a conventional school I often attract a group of children merely by listening to them. Sometimes I have had to leave a class because I have been accidentally disrupting the atmosphere by drawing a little crowd who all want to tell me things. At Sands there were plenty of people to listen, and my elderly presence was no longer necessary.

The anarchic atmosphere of the school does not result in an absence of order. If lines have to be learnt for a play, if a laboratory is to be a safe place to work, if those who want a quiet place to study are to be able to find one, discipline has to be accepted. This is not discipline imposed by an authority figure, it is not discipline devised by the school, it is the discipline of reality. Of course that kind of discipline applies in the school – there would be no way of avoiding it. And the more basic business of sticking to school rules is enforced by the students.

This is not always apparent to new students. One new-comer had ignored the rule about drugs, and come into school in the afternoon stoned. He was brought up at a school meeting, and denied the accusation. He stuck to his line for some time until another student, shaven-headed, tattooed and ear-ringed (I may be exaggerating), broke into the discussion. "Stop farting about, we all know you were fucking stoned," he said, or something equally strong. The new student could not stand up to an attack from such an unexpected source.

The effectiveness of this co-operation was stressed by a Sands student who had previously been at one of the local comprehensive schools, when he answered a question at a meeting of prospective Sands parents. Drugs had been a much greater problem for the students at his previous school, he said, but the staff either genuinely did not know, or else pretended not to know because they felt powerless to do anything about it.

In an early prospectus for Sands I had tried to define the ideas on which the school was based. I wrote, 'Children who are trusted will become trustworthy. Children who are respected will learn a proper self-respect. Children who are cared for will learn to care for others.'

By the time I left I had realised that though this was true, it was only a remedial approach, to be used when things had already gone wrong. The essence of the issue, which I had at that time overlooked, is that children are trustworthy unless people have not trusted them, they have a proper self-respect if others have always respected them and that they care for others as long as they have been cared for themselves.

At Sands children are trusted, respected and cared for because that is what all children deserve, not in order to achieve some objective. It is gratifying that this approach usually results in social responsibility, enthusiasm for particular subjects, self-confidence and many other desirable characteristics, but this is not its primary purpose.

At the schools I had attended as a child, at Repton and at Lawrence Weston I had seen systems of control that were supposed to achieve these ends. They sometimes succeeded, but it is a natural reaction to resist force, and beneath the surface there was a tide of hostility and rebellion. (Joanna Gore's book, *Leave me Alone*, describes how such an attitude is fostered even in a comparatively liberal primary school.)

The reason these systems of control are unnecessary is that the characteristics I have described as "desirable" – social responsibility and so on – are in fact just as desirable to the children themselves as they are for society at large. Sands has created an atmosphere which makes it easy for children to develop into the admirable people they naturally want to become.

CHAPTER FIVE

SANDS SCHOOL

Park School, a junior school to continue in the Dartington tradition, had been founded by my wife, Lynette, and a group of parents and teachers when Dartington Hall School closed its junior section in 1986. A year later the senior school was closed, leaving a group of children behind who did not want to be sent to more conventional schools. Sybilla Higgs, Sean Bellamy and I, three of their teachers, worked with them to produce a new school which would have broadly the same approach as Dartington, but which could never be killed off by a board of trustees who did not understand it. It was to be entirely under the control of the students and staff who worked there.

By law Sands had to have a Board of Governors, but we made as sure as possible that it could not be closed down as Dartington had been. The Sands Instrument of Government includes the sentence, 'Due regard shall be taken by the Governors of the views and wishes of the School Community of staff and pupils on all matters relating to the management, conduct and underlying philosophy of the School and to behaviour in the School.' There is ambiguity about the phrase 'due regard', but at Sands this sentence is taken to mean that no decisions are valid if they go against the wishes of the school meeting.

We started Sands without a building. Becky White, whose three elder siblings had all been to Dartington, was determined that she was going to have a similar education. Her parents allowed us to start the school on the ground floor of their house, on the condition that every evening everything was restored to order.

On the morning of the first day, before anyone had been asked to do anything, a thirteen-year-old boy who had not learnt to read at his previous school laid his head on the table where he was sitting and cried. I think it was because he felt himself thrust into a new situation where his old failure would be repeated. This was not necessary at Sands. With Sybilla's help he began to make up lost ground, and though he did not immediately turn into a good reader he found he was respected for himself anyway. We are not all equally good at everything, and there is no point in pretending that we are. At Sands it was understood that being good at school subjects or good at games is not important for everyone. There are many qualities such as self-respect, concern for others and sheer happiness that matter infinitely more.

A group of supportive parents and friends of the school helped to look for an appropriate building. Site after site was rejected, either because it was unsuitable or because planning permission could not be granted for change of use. Then, by an

extraordinary stroke of luck, we found that the caretakers of a building called Greylands, in Ashburton, were showing round people interested in buying it. It had formerly been Ashburton High School for Girls, and had also housed a Steiner school and was still registered for educational use. It was a beautiful house with a wonderful, large garden and several outhouses, but I thought the rooms were too small and that many of the rooms were too dark. Nevertheless we invited all our students to visit it, and at the school meeting after the visit there was almost unanimous enthusiasm. My doubts were overridden, and we approached the owner. His first reaction was to ask how we knew that he was thinking of selling; apparently the caretakers had been acting entirely on their own initiative. His second reaction was to approve of the idea of selling to a school, and with the help of a large bank loan we were able to buy.

The very smallest rooms turned out to be divided by plasterboard partitions, which were soon demolished, and the building has been a great success. Sands had taught me one of its first lessons about the wisdom of consulting with its students.

To begin with, though, I felt that Sands was bound to be a second-best, because it was so small. We could not afford the range of specialist staff and equipment that Dartington Hall School had provided. I was, for example, the maths teacher, the French teacher and the drama teacher, and I was running the rather primitive jazz band.

As the school has grown so the facilities and the staff have grown with it, but it is still small and impoverished by comparison with Dartington; the staff are underpaid, the sports court needs refurbishment, there is no orchestra or choir and school plays are performed in a classroom where there is a tiny stage and room for only about forty in the audience.

However, in other ways the school has surpassed Dartington. At the discussions we had before the school opened the two powers the students most wanted were the power to appoint or dismiss staff, and the power to admit or reject applicants for places. At Dartington the students had neither of these powers. At Sands their decisions have justified the confidence placed in them. There have been occasions when members of staff might have been dismissed by a conventional head, and the school meeting has refused to accept the advice of the administrator. Except in one case, when the teacher chose to leave, those involved have been invaluable to the school.

At Dartington a specific restriction to the power of the pupils was that they were not allowed to make decisions that related to health or safety. No such restriction applies at Sands. It has always seemed to me that such questions are among those which are most likely to be decided sensibly by children; their health and safety naturally matter to them. (When I was at Aller Park, for instance, there was adult

concern about a fashion for racing bicycles up a low ramp and jumping over the prostrate bodies of volunteers; after a long discussion the bicyclists decided that the trick must only be done on grass, and that long jumps over more than one person were too dangerous. When I arrived at Foxhole there was a so-called health-and-safety rule that no one could carry a firework in a pocket; this was because, at some time in the past, a pupil had suffered bad burns as a result of a firework in his pocket accidentally exploding. The bicycle-jumping rules seems to me to be sensible, if slightly stricter than necessary, but the adult-decided rule about fireworks seems to have crossed the line between safety and neurosis – who else has ever heard of an accident involving a firework going off in somebody's pocket?)

When there have been crises over the actions of particular individuals or groups at Sands the School Meeting has been able to find a way through. I, and I know some other staff, were often near to tears at the wisdom and generosity shown by the children in such situations. The structure at Dartington did not allow any opportunity for such behaviour.

Dartington had few rules, but at one of the very first school meetings at Sands a boy called Andrew Edwards formulated the declaration that the school depends on common sense rather than rules. We started with only two rules – no alcohol and no drugs – but very soon the students who wanted to smoke suggested a third rule: smoking should only be permitted out of doors. When we moved to our own premises smokers were confined to the lower half of the garden, beyond a barrier of bushes. As the school has grown, so has the number of rules – there, for instance, half-a-dozen rules about water-fights – but common sense is still the justification for them, and if they prove unreasonable or unnecessary they can be altered or dropped.

The Trustees of Dartington had declared that there was no longer any demand for a school with this kind of philosophy, but in some years Sands has had almost twice as many day-students in each year-group as Dartington Hall School had. Park School and Sands School have been running now for fifteen years and more. The demand for this kind of education has been growing ever since the Dartington Trustees decided that it was out of date.

For the first year or two I was the head teacher, but I am not head teacher material. I don't like imposing myself, and at Sands there was no need to. All important decisions were made by the school meeting, and what I had to do was to see that these were duly carried out. At my own suggestion my title was changed from 'head teacher' to 'administrator.'

Many teachers who have known only rule-based schools find it hard to adjust to Andrew Edwards' idea of depending on common sense. Some want to exert authority instead of appealing to reason. If they have differences of opinion with

children they expect their opinions to be accepted as a matter of discipline. If a newcomer to the staff at Sands takes this attitude, the expectation in itself creates conflict; the children are used to co-operating and are offended by the assumption that they do not wish to do so. For teachers who understand the system it is a relief not to have to attempt to impose their will. Some adults find the resulting atmosphere bewildering, but most children understand it immediately. The system evolved according to the wishes of other children before them, and to a child it seems entirely sensible. The staff who stay long enough to appreciate it, stay on and on, in spite of the small salaries.

Some visitors are delighted by the informal helpfulness of the students, and others are offended by the way that students may pay no attention when they come into the room; they see the acknowledgement of their presence as ordinary courtesy, but when people are always going in and out of the room the children do not see the entry of one more person as a reason to interrupt their own conversations or work or games. I had seen this attitude before in my cousins' house at Glemham, where there was so much coming and going that adults behaved in the same way, and occasionally caused similar offence.

At Sands students treat visitors as they treat each other, addressing them as equals, pushing past them with a cursory 'Excuse me' if they are chasing or being chased, helping them to find what they need if they are at a loss. They often answer the telephone in the school office.

The most important events at Sands are the weekly school meetings. They discuss the timetable, rules, useful work, expeditions, appointment of staff, admission of new pupils, problems of behaviour, stolen property, visits from schools from other countries, involvement of parents, plans for the future. They are chaired by a pupil and are sometimes rowdy, but the rowdiness is as nothing compared to the House of Commons.

It was from the school meetings at Sands that I learnt most.

In the early days, when I was still described as the head teacher, we had a pupil who was causing serious anxiety. He was eleven or twelve years old, and had come to Sands because he had been so frightened and unhappy at his local school. At Sands he continued to be frightened and unhappy for much of the time, and when he thought he was threatened he would defend himself by throwing stones or picking up weapons. He never actually hurt anybody, which suggests that he did not mean to do so, but one day there were three incidents; I don't remember exactly what they were, but he had been known to pursue someone with a metal metre ruler and on another occasion with an electric drill. On this day I did something that the school constitution did not allow me to do: I rang up his parents and asked them to take him home. They duly came and fetched him and I called a school meeting to tell

the school what I had done and to ask whether we should allow him to come back. To my amazement, the feeling of the meeting was very strongly that he should come back, and that more effort should be made to make him feel at home. "We have not been being nice enough to him," one pupil said. He came back, and the students tried to be nicer to him, but he still did not trust them, and his behaviour did not improve. Eventually I made contact with the local child psychiatrist and arranged for his parents to take him away. I persuaded myself that I had to make the decision on my own, because there were some decisions that were just too difficult to ask children to take. I felt I had coped with the situation sensibly.

A year or so later we had three thirteen-year-olds who removed all the petty cash from the school office, took a bus to a nearby town, stole a torch and some other small items from shops and then went to the railway station and tried to buy tickets to York. When they found that they had not got enough money to buy tickets to York, they asked for tickets to Brighton. The ticket clerk was suspicious and called the police, the police fetched them and took them to the police station and rang up the school to tell us to collect them. I drove there at once, and they were so relieved to get away from the police that they got into my car without question.

On the way home I stopped in a lay-by and turned round to the three children on the back seat to try to find out how they were feeling. They were feeling furiously negative. They had intended to run away from home because they hated their families. They hated the school. They hated the other students. They hated the staff. It all burst out of them with a stream of obscenities.

I could not make any contact with them at all, so I drove back to school, where they announced that they were calling a school meeting because they did not want me telling a lot of fucking lies about them. The school meeting was called, and everybody came. As soon as the room was quiet the leader of the three described exactly what they had done, and ended by saying, "Now are you going to expel us?"

At first the meeting was indignant, shocked not so much by the fact that they had done these things, but that there had been no shame expressed and no apology offered. Then Sean Bellamy (who when I retired a few years later took over my role as administrator) suggested that anger and criticism were not the way forward, and it would be better if everyone remained calm.

After that none of the adults in the room spoke for about an hour. The other students asked the delinquents why they had done what they did, how they felt about it, and in the end whether they actually wanted to stay at the school. To my surprise, all three wanted to stay, and a vote was taken for each one, to see whether they should be allowed to. Conditions were made, but all three were allowed to stay. They were suspended for a week, and during that week they had to come in with their parents and discuss the situation with a group of two students and one adult.

The school meeting had resolved a situation in which I, with over thirty years experience, had been completely baffled. When I had arrived back with my swearing car-load, I had had no idea what to do at all. This made me think that perhaps I had not been so clever with the boy in my first story. Perhaps if he had been at the school meeting and heard the general agreement that people had not been nice enough to him he might have understood a great deal better than he understood the message that I passed on to him. Perhaps the students would have found a solution to the problem that had seemed to me intractable.

A group of children and adults, talking together, is bound to find wiser solutions to problems than a small group of adults, or worse still a single adult, deciding alone. This seems to me now so obvious that I cannot understand why I had not always known it.

Until the two events I have just described I had believed that there were some situations in which it would be better if a head teacher took individual responsibility. Afterwards I was sure that I had been wrong.

The school meeting is often more forgiving than an adult or a group of adults would be, but this gentleness is usually wise. Children find ingenious ways to avoid harshness. One successful ex-pupil who had several times been treated with extraordinary generosity by the school meeting after incidents of apparently malicious theft told me, 'If it had not been for Sands I would have been in prison by now.'

I learnt most from Sands when things went wrong. I could tell many more stories about students who had been unhappy at other schools, one to the point of attempting suicide, who came to Sands and found a new joy in life and made real successes of their education. I could mention the dyspraxic who has gone to university, the Asperger's syndrome that has become almost unnoticeable, the boy in the wheel-chair joining in with basket-ball and many more, but such stories would suggest that Sands is a school for students with problems.

The stories about happy, purposeful students who go through the school successfully and are now leading happy adult lives are not so interesting, but they form the majority. Sybilla has suggested that the happiness of these students is infectious, and it is that in itself that helps the students with difficulties. Not everyone is suited by Sands, but it suits far more people than could conceivably be suited by any authoritarian school with a monolithic curriculum.

By the end of my five years there I still mourned for Dartington, but I felt that in some ways Sands was an even better school. I had learnt to trust children more completely, and to trust them not just to come to decisions that I approved of, but also to surprise me and to make me change my mind. At the school meeting everyone has one vote, regardless of age, and no one has a veto. The building and

the grounds, though mortgaged, belong to the school, not to some outside body which can take them back. Visiting adults who have attended school meetings have often been struck by the way the students take their ownership for granted. The meeting does not make suggestions, it takes decisions. Adults are respected for their experience, but in any discussion that experience is only one ingredient among many. Where there is disagreement there are usually adults and students on both sides.

Occasionally there have been meetings from which adults have been excluded. The decisions made there have been just as effective as those made at the full school meetings, and they have generally been made much more quickly. To make a generalisation, adults are inclined to see discussions as competitive, and to restate their opinions even after they have been rejected by the majority; they are more interested in establishing the importance of their own points of view than in considering anyone else's. Children at a school like Sands are primarily interested in finding solutions to problems, and waste less time.

I saw a devastatingly clear demonstration of this some years later at an IDEC (International Democratic Education Conference) at Summerhill. To show how a Summerhill school meeting worked, the participants, who were nearly all adults, were invited at the first session to make their own rules for the few days they were to be there. Someone proposed that there should be no noise after ten o'clock at night. Someone else said that eleven o'clock would be better. Others took sides, or argued for half past ten as a compromise. It went on for almost an hour. I can't actually remember how it ended, except that it became clear that no consensus was in sight, so the discussion was abandoned. Any group of children from Summerhill or Sands would have settled the question in a few minutes.

My style of teaching had developed while I was at Dartington, but at Sands I learnt little new. Teaching methods are not central to the school's philosophy. What I learnt there was more to do with trust and personal relationships. However I did see one confirmation of a basic truth about teaching that made a strong impression on me. Before he began working at the school my son Nathan, who was an enthusiastic climber, agreed to take a group of Sands children climbing at Hay Tor. I drove them out there in the school minibus, and saw what happened. When they arrived he whisked up the face of a rock, fixed some protection and lowered himself back to the ground. Then he asked who wanted to try the climb, and everyone wanted to. He chose someone to go first, showed him how to attach his safety harness and stood back. He did not offer a single word of advice until it was requested. It was requested surprisingly soon, and extremely emphatically.

Most teachers are convinced that they must teach children how to do something "properly" before they allow them to try to do it their own way. Would-be carpenters, for instance, often have to learn to make joints before they have anything

to joint together. If only their teachers had the patience to wait to be asked for advice they would learn far more earnestly and with a great deal more pleasure. If what children were doing in the classroom was something they wanted to do really badly, they would be clamouring for help when they met difficulties.

The first teaching I saw that approached this situation was not at Sands, but at Countesthorpe College in Leicester in the 1970s. There were fourteen hundred students there, aged between fourteen and eighteen, and below the sixth form every one had an individual timetable. Almost all, if not all, these timetables were different. Some subjects were taught in classes behind closed doors in the ordinary way, but what was special to Countesthorpe was 'team time,' when pupils were under the supervision of a team of teachers, but each one of them was working independently on a topic of personal choice. 'Personal choice' is too weak a description – they were topics of absorbing interest to the particular people working on them, for instance the grand-daughter of a market stall-holder recording his memories, a boy writing a play to be performed in the local primary schools, a girl studying racism so that she would know what to say when people expressed racist views, a boy concerned for the environment photographing examples of pollution, a girl describing her work with mentally handicapped children.

Both at Dartington and at Sands I tried to recreate this situation, but although I think I sometimes helped people to write imaginatively about their own ideas, I never matched Countesthorpe's success with factual work. The only time I even saw how well it might work in my classes was when Hannah Roberts chose to describe an accident in which she had been hurt. She had been in a bus on the way to school; another vehicle had scraped against the side of it, breaking some windows, and she had been injured by the broken glass. Previously she had found it difficult to write at any length, but about this incident she wrote several pages, and, to my great surprise, her spelling had miraculously improved. She never actually finished the story, but what she had written obviously gave her great satisfaction, and showed me the importance of allowing children to work at topics that interest them.

Other teachers at Sands – Sybilla Higgs in her English classes, and Steve Hoare in the art room in particular – have succeeded in doing this, but they have had to work largely within a normal timetable.

What I did learn at Sands, in relation to teaching, was a little about the differences between what the teachers did there and what happened at other schools.

At one time one of the requirements for the GCSE English coursework was that candidates should write a set of instructions. At Sands the students chose to write about things that they knew from personal experience, and everyone chose a different topic; one girl, for instance, whose hair was sometimes scarlet and sometimes blue, gave instructions as to how to dye your hair. When Sybilla went to

a moderation meeting, where teachers from different schools compared and adjusted their marking, she was extremely impressed by one candidate's account of how to put up a tent, illustrated by a series of photographs. She then looked at the next candidate from the same school, and found another account of how to put up a tent, illustrated by the same photographs.

Every candidate from that school had been set the same exercise, and given the same pictures. The teacher had made it as easy as possible for the candidates to do what was required and get a good mark, regardless of whether the work was of any interest to them. Sybilla had encouraged all her pupils individually to adapt the examination requirements to suit themselves. This was not so much an issue of teaching method as of respect for the individual student.

For three years I taught GCSE Drama, which meant that every year I visited another school to see the work they were doing and to approve the staff's assessments, and someone from another school came to see what we had been doing and to approve mine. What I saw, in each of the three schools I visited, was students exercising their own imagination, creating a huge variety of dramatic pieces that were entirely their own, thoroughly enjoying themselves and working with concentration and commitment. I saw one teacher who achieved this with a class of sixty, working in a gymnasium.

It is not necessary, even in a conventional setting, to insist on every student doing exactly the same thing.

The degree of conventionality outside the drama classes in one of these schools was illustrated during my visit there. To get to the drama hall I had to walk along corridors lined with windows into classrooms where children sat in rows at desks. And then, when I arrived, I found myself with a group of young people who seemed lively, self-confident and individual. I immediately felt I liked them, and that they were more interesting than the children I had met at other schools. It was not until I was taken to the staff-room for a coffee-break that I realised what had made the difference. A senior teacher approached the drama teacher, my host, and indignantly asked him what authority he had had to allow his pupils to come to school in their own clothes, and not in uniform. He had stopped some of these children to tell them off, and had been told that they had special permission. He felt he had been made to look foolish, and he was angry. He gave no weight to the drama teacher's excuses that the children were having a full day of drama for the moderation and so would not be working under any other teacher, and that they felt less inhibited in their own clothes and were therefore able to involve themselves more completely in the work.

For the angry teacher, at least, uniform rules were more important than helping children to work well.

Supporters of school uniforms sometimes argue that it doesn't make any difference to the children whether they wear uniform or not. This drama teacher would not have agreed.

Nor would Rachel Roberts, a Sands School pupil who had to wait for the school bus outside the entrance to the Totnes Community College, which at that time still had a school uniform. I asked her whether she was not embarrassed to stand alone there while crowds of people, very differently dressed, swept past her. 'Oh no,' she said. 'It's *them* who are wearing uniform.'

Most adolescents hate uniform. They hate it because it doesn't suit them. They hate it because it makes them look like school-children and they are ashamed of being school-children. They hate it because they want to distinguish themselves, or to identify themselves with particular groups, and decorating your school bag is a poor substitute for wearing your own clothes. They hate it because it is compulsory. They hate it because it makes them feel they look stupid.

Yet uniform rules are so powerful that they can result in children being excluded from school altogether. At Lawrence Weston there was a boy in my group who could not come to school for a while because his mother could not afford to buy him any school trousers. That was many years ago, but I read recently about 22 children being separated from other pupils at Wessex Community School in Cheddar as a punishment for wearing plain blazers bought in a supermarket instead of the regulation blazers with the school crest, which cost £9 more. One of the comments made by a student when Totnes Community College dropped its uniform rules was that the contacts between staff and pupils had become much more often positive: beforehand they had been mostly concerned with petty infractions of the rules about dress.

Sands avoids all such problems. Rowan Reid was not allowed into her comprehensive school unless she wore school uniform and forsook her dreadlocks, so she came to Sands, wore dreadlocks for a while and then adopted a more conventional appearance. Livvy Croce came because her school refused to allow her to wear a nose-stud. After a year or so at Sands she abandoned the nose-stud because she no longer liked it.

There is a great variety of approach among the staff. Tim Currant, the chair of the governors, a professional team-builder in the world of business, offered his services to the school staff, but found the range of opinion so wide that there was little he could do. There was a universal commitment to the welfare of the students, but no agreement as to how it should be achieved. And yet when you see Sands as what it is, a community of people of different ages working together, it has a cohesion that adults find difficult to define, but children usually recognise immediately.

There is perhaps a clue to be found in Carol Gilligan's theories about the difference between a typically male and a typically female attitude to morality. As she explains in her book, *In a Different Voice*, most men rely on a morality of rules, and most women are motivated by a morality of caring. Men have dominated education for so long that it is difficult to recognise a morality of caring when it crops up in a school. Luckily few of the people who have worked at Sands, men or women, have had that difficulty.

I retired from Sands after five years, when I was sixty. The rest of the staff could accept me as a person who lived in their world, but to the students I was grandparent age – someone to like well enough, but not someone who shared their interests. I felt that I had too much influence on the staff and too little in common with the students. I could dispel a group of students merely by sitting with them and joining in the conversation.

This was curious, because when I visit a conventional school I often attract a group of children merely by listening to them. Sometimes I have had to leave a class because I have been accidentally disrupting the atmosphere by drawing a little crowd who all want to tell me things. At Sands there were plenty of people to listen, and my elderly presence was no longer necessary.

The anarchic atmosphere of the school does not result in an absence of order. If lines have to be learnt for a play, if a laboratory is to be a safe place to work, if those who want a quiet place to study are to be able to find one, discipline has to be accepted. This is not discipline imposed by an authority figure, it is not discipline devised by the school, it is the discipline of reality. Of course that kind of discipline applies in the school – there would be no way of avoiding it. And the more basic business of sticking to school rules is enforced by the students.

This is not always apparent to new students. One new-comer had ignored the rule about drugs, and come into school in the afternoon stoned. He was brought up at a school meeting, and denied the accusation. He stuck to his line for some time until another student, shaven-headed, tattooed and ear-ringed (I may be exaggerating), broke into the discussion. "Stop farting about, we all know you were fucking stoned," he said, or something equally strong. The new student could not stand up to an attack from such an unexpected source.

The effectiveness of this co-operation was stressed by a Sands student who had previously been at one of the local comprehensive schools, when he answered a question at a meeting of prospective Sands parents. Drugs had been a much greater problem for the students at his previous school, he said, but the staff either genuinely did not know, or else pretended not to know because they felt powerless to do anything about it.

In an early prospectus for Sands I had tried to define the ideas on which the school was based. I wrote, 'Children who are trusted will become trustworthy. Children who are respected will learn a proper self-respect. Children who are cared for will learn to care for others.'

By the time I left I had realised that though this was true, it was only a remedial approach, to be used when things had already gone wrong. The essence of the issue, which I had at that time overlooked, is that children are trustworthy unless people have not trusted them, they have a proper self-respect if others have always respected them and that they care for others as long as they have been cared for themselves.

At Sands children are trusted, respected and cared for because that is what all children deserve, not in order to achieve some objective. It is gratifying that this approach usually results in social responsibility, enthusiasm for particular subjects, self-confidence and many other desirable characteristics, but this is not its primary purpose.

At the schools I had attended as a child, at Repton and at Lawrence Weston I had seen systems of control that were supposed to achieve these ends. They sometimes succeeded, but it is a natural reaction to resist force, and beneath the surface there was a tide of hostility and rebellion. (Joanna Gore's book, *Leave me Alone*, describes how such an attitude is fostered even in a comparatively liberal primary school.)

The reason these systems of control are unnecessary is that the characteristics I have described as "desirable" – social responsibility and so on – are in fact just as desirable to the children themselves as they are for society at large. Sands has created an atmosphere which makes it easy for children to develop into the admirable people they naturally want to become.

CHAPTER SIX

ALL OVER THE WORLD

While I was teaching at Dartington and Sands I had little time to think about other schools. What we were doing seemed right to me, so I felt no need to explore. I knew of Summerhill and Countesthorpe, but otherwise I thought we were probably unique. It was not until I retired and began visiting schools all around the world that I realised how wrong I was. Not only did many of the places I visited embody the very relationship between adults and children that I had learnt to value, but also they extended the implied freedoms in many different ways.

In addition there was something altogether new to me. When Curry wrote about Dartington he said ". . . while I believe most of our teaching to have been good, and much of it outstanding, I cannot claim that in this field we have done much pioneering. Perhaps, under my successors, this omission will be repaired." (Curry, 1970, p. 218) His successors failed to repair the omission at Dartington, but it was repaired in a variety of ways elsewhere.

The first way I had already met in Britain, before I retired. Jenifer Smith, whose comments about Aller Park I have quoted earlier in this book, went on to teach at Countesthorpe College, in Leicestershire. I visited her there in the 1970s and saw how her students worked. I was immensely impressed.

After she left Countesthorpe she described her own learning experiences there in her M. Phil thesis for Southampton University, which has been published in a condensed form in the USA under the title *Cat Among the Pigeons*.

She had found, firstly, that students learn more effectively when they are studying what really interests them personally, and that therefore every student needs first to find out what it is he or she really wants to learn and how he or she wishes to record that learning. Secondly, she had found that however much the teacher may wish to step back and allow her students to explore for themselves, she cannot avoid influencing their work. In her first drafts of her thesis she was unable to allow herself the freedom she allowed her students; she had felt that she must conform to the standard academic framework. As will be seen from the following extracts, she eventually managed to throw off these restrictions.

You may do anything you like.

It may be difficult to do anything at all.

Realisations about what may be possible begin at the students' first interview with their tutor.

For some it is what they have been longing for;

or it makes something possible that they had perhaps hardly imagined and now they can hardly believe their luck.

For others it is terrifying.

It sounds a good idea but so what, it's school.

It sounds a good idea but I'm not sure what I'll do about it.

It's fantastic and I'm going to be a changed person . . . but in practice it's harder than it seems.

Oh yes, we've chosen our own projects before . . . and out they come with those dull tired old 'Projects' which somehow haven't involved a real choice, choice which has demanded some thought about what they would like to learn, what they need to do, for themselves.

It makes some angry.

Teach us. Tell us the syllabus. Yes, but what have we got to do?

We've come to school to learn, not to muck about.

Tell me what to do and I'll do it!! Anything! No, not that . . . No, none of those things . . . I know what I'll do.

Smith, 1989, p. 83

Very often I gave students permission to do what they already wanted to do but hadn't thought was acceptable.

Ibid., p. 88

You write a title, gaze through the window, talk to your friend.

How long can I keep away?

I can see a way forward. I know what you should do.

We are both uneasy with this inaction.

Right. This is what you must do. And This. And this.

I hear your sigh. Watch your hand with reluctant obedience picking up the pen.

No, I say, wait a little longer.

In the silence; amidst the talk; in the space that is yours, is the way ahead.

You speak to me of steam locomotion, of evolution, of cruelty to animals, of Victorian Leicester

you draw dream shapes, cartoon figures, meticulous designs, naive illustrations to your stories

you write of magic, of love, of horror, of yourself, yourself, yourself

you struggle up a rock face; speak with a deaf child; dig for bottles; watch as the image emerges in the rocking tray of developer.

Ibid. p 43

It seems to me now that I cannot separate myself from the way students worked and what I learnt from it. My way of working, my beliefs and attitudes made a difference to how students worked. I have spent years trying to deny my part in what I describe in the classroom. I am now able to acknowledge to myself that a consciousness of my being in the classroom is part of my responsibility as a teacher. I have been disconcerted, when presenting students' work to other teachers, by the response that the work that they see is fundamentally my doing. Teachers have responded to work like [that of one particular student] by saying that I must have told her what to write, given her headings. My concern has been to emphasise that the work that students do arises from them and in doing so I have denied my presence in their work as the other. My actions as teacher enable and prevent actions on the part of the student.

Ibid. p. 64

Something that was particularly exciting about working at Countesthorpe was seeing students suddenly filled with the energy of their own imagination and intellect; realising possibilities and reaching beyond the limits; taking control of their own learning. The most important thing for me was to make that expansion possible for each student and then, to the best of my capabilities, to offer whatever it might be that would maximise the potential for each student.

I still feel that excitement when I see students suddenly pleased with themselves, doing something that somehow had not been possible before or glad that they can continue to grow.

Ibid p 50

I would have liked to imitate this open, welcoming, inspiring approach, but I never achieved anything like it. I went on teaching in the ways I have described in previous chapters.

Many years later I visited Mirambika, the small independent school in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in New Delhi (where there is also a large conventional school for girls). I heard that according to Sri Aurobindo the first principle of education is that nothing can be taught. If he is right, and it is true that nothing can be taught, what are teachers to do? The answer must be that they should help the children to find out what they themselves want to learn, in other words exactly what Jeni Smith was doing at Countesthorpe.

I had visited her and seen that it was possible. In Hannah Roberts' account of the bus accident at Sands I had seen the transformation that can come from writing about something that has personal importance, but I was far from the formulation, "Nothing can be taught." I still find it an overstatement, but an overstatement that makes me think hard.

Another source of inspiration from outside Dartington and Sands was a presentation at a conference in Exeter in 1993 on children's rights. It was given by the radio journalist, Sarah McCrum. She described the Children's Hearing at the Rio Environmental Summit in 1992, where children from different countries had made short speeches about their hopes for the future, questioning a panel of adult politicians which included Al Gore. I went to speak to her about it afterwards, and she lent me tape-recordings. One particular speech moved me so much that I was inspired to research a whole book – *Children Don't Start Wars* – which is as yet unpublished except on the internet. This is my account of that speech in my book:

The last quotation I want to make is from Marthe Olive, aged 12, from Rwanda. She spoke in French, so what follows is a translation. She spoke calmly and clearly, in a matter-of-fact way, without apparent emotion.

My name is Marthe Olive. I come from Rwanda. I want to talk about the problems that I have in Rwanda. For years the children of Rwanda have been unhappy because of the war. They have seen children like themselves die, little ones and big ones, men and women. Lots of families are scattered. They have left their possessions to get away from the guns and the bombs. Now they have no shelter, no food, no clothes. They have nothing. Some children have become orphans and no one takes care of them. Others, their schools have been destroyed and they do not know where to go. We do not want to live in this war, in this misery. Wars kill innocent people, they spread disorder and hatred. They slow down development. Children do not like war. Those in Rwanda want the war to end very soon so that people can live in peace. Thank you.

This speech was translated from French into Portuguese by a professional translator. He began in the expressionless way interpreters speak, occasionally hesitating over a choice of word, sounding like a student doing a translation exercise, and then suddenly he was overcome by the meaning of what he was saying, and he was unable to go on. When the audience appreciated his emotion they applauded, and he went on a little before having to stop again, and then finished the last couple of sentences with an incoherent rush ending in tears.

Al Gore later commented on this incident, and said he had been much moved. He attributed the interpreter's emotion to fully realising the pain and the suffering in her homeland that this young girl was describing.

Marthe Olive did not describe her own suffering in particular, and she did not ask for sympathy. She simply reported the suffering of the children of Rwanda. What disturbs us so deeply as adults when we hear her message is that all of a sudden we are made to understand what the word war actually means. There is no euphemism, there is no political apologia, there is simply a straightforward statement of the facts. The normal adult detachment becomes impossible, and once we have lost our detachment then the sentence "Children do not like war" becomes an indictment of our former attitude. We are suddenly restored to a simpler ethical system where the ultimate wrong is to cause suffering, and all political excuses become unacceptable. "[Children] in Rwanda want the war to end very soon so that people can live in peace."

An atmosphere had been established at the Hearing in which children's voices were heard and their opinions were listened to seriously. What I think happened during the translation of Marthe Olive's words was that the interpreter found himself saying things that are obvious to anybody, but that we usually take great care to avoid noticing. Adults are trained to accept political explanations, to foresee complications, to put power before people, but when they actually listen with respect to someone who does none of these things, they see at once how wrong they have been. Normally we are able to ignore such voices, but the Rio hearing had created a situation in which that was impossible. The interpreter found himself speaking words that echoed in his own heart, words that he recognised as containing an important truth, a truth that if it were more widely understood might even bring the war to an end. What he was weeping at was, I think, the sudden recognition of an ideal, and the realisation that it had for so long been scorned as an irrelevance.

I wrote [earlier in this book] of the walls which adults build around their own moral awareness, so that they are not interrupted by awkward demands from their consciences. It seems that children are capable of pulling those walls down. Children are the guardians of the conscience of mankind.

Gribble, 2001, pp 51, 52

Before I had heard Marthe-Olive and her weeping interpreter I would not have expressed my respect for children in this particular way, but I do not consider it to be an overstatement like Sri Aurobindo's declaration of principle. Children may be corrupted and they may make mistakes, but they are vividly aware of moral issues that many adults have taught themselves to ignore.

By this time, then, I had seen a different way of teaching and learnt a new and profound reason for respecting children, but I still knew very little about any schools similar to Summerhill or Sands in other countries. I knew Lotte Kreissler of the Freie Gesamtschule in Vienna, and I knew that there were other free schools in Austria, but Lotte's was the only one I had seen. I had briefly visited the Laborschule and the Oberstufenkolleg in Bielefeld, in Germany, and been interested but not overwhelmed. Then I met Alison Stallibrass, the author of *The Self-respecting Child* and *Being Me and Also Us*, and she told me about Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts. (It had been Alison who put me right over one of my old misconceptions. I was telling her my difficulty in answering a journalist who asked me at what age it was sensible start allowing children to make their own decisions about their lives; Alison, who had worked mainly with younger children, said that her problem had been deciding at what age it was sensible to stop allowing them to do so. Put these two problems together, and they cancel each other out.)

I wrote to Dan Greenberg at Sudbury Valley and he told me about the Democratic School of Hadera, in Israel. In the early summer of 1993 there was to be a big conference in Jerusalem, entitled "Education for Democracy in a Multi-cultural Society," and Dan arranged for a group from Sands to be invited. Three students (Rowan Hart-Williams, May Fitzpatrick and Kate Marmot), Sybilla Higgs and I duly attended. As it turned out most of the participants were politicians, academics and philosophers, so Yakov Hecht, the head of the Hadera school, invited the small group of people who were actually working in schools, either as pupils or staff, to come to Hadera for a further week-end of discussion. Dan Greenberg was there, and so were Lois Holzman, of the Barbara Taylor School in New York, and my old friend Lotte Kreissler. The meeting was so successful that we decided to have another one every year. This was the beginning of the International Democratic Education Conferences, which have since been held in Austria, Britain (three times), India, Israel (twice), Japan, New Zealand, Ukraine, and the United States. The 2005 IDEC is to be held in Germany.

I had already retired from Sands, at the age of sixty, in 1992, and I decided to write a book about some of the free places of education (not all schools) that I had at last discovered. I have since been round the world twice, and spent a week or more with many different organisations, observing, asking questions and above all talking

to children. I have described what I have seen and heard in two books, *Real Education: Varieties of Freedom* and *Lifelines*.

One early international visit was to Jürg Jegge, the Swiss educator whose books had been recommended to me by Lotte Kreissler. I visited him in order to write about his work in *Real Education*.

After years running a remedial class he had worked with children whose problems were so severe that no ordinary school would keep them. These problems included depression, schizophrenia, brain damage, family troubles and drug addiction. He has written books about his work, and *Dummheit ist lernbar* (*Stupidity is learnable*) has sold over 100,000 copies. In Britain he is virtually unknown.

All teachers, Jegge told me, have good theories; they want to help children to overcome their difficulties, and to gain self-respect; they want to see them developing their talents and learning at their own pace; they want them to care for one another and to grow up to take responsible attitudes in the adult world. Unfortunately teachers' practice does not usually match their theories. Only too often schools merely expose the children's difficulties and intensify their problems. According to Jegge, schools are actually harmful. In his books he gives many stories which show that the 'stupid' child does not want to be stupid, but is made so by circumstance, the 'wicked' child does not want to be wicked, but is made so by circumstance, the insolent child is created by circumstance, the thief is created by circumstance, the bully is created by circumstance, the 'intolerable' child is created by circumstance.

Jegge tells one story of prolonged help for a drug addict: he found jobs for him, arranged cures, allowed him to share his flat, paid his debts so he could make a fresh start, tolerated lies and accusations and theft. 'This is not a question of good deeds,' he said. 'It is a question of something quite else. A whole life, in fact. A life that is just as important as mine or my reader's. A life that really had a chance of becoming rich and happy. But which had never been able to develop. Because there were no relationships which might have protected and supported it.' (Jegge, 1985, p. 168, translated)

From an impartial observation of traditional schools it would be easy to suppose that the prime purpose of school education was to pick out a few successful children and to humiliate the rest. Here Jegge meditates on the kinds of humiliation that his pupils had suffered.

Small, at first sight unimportant single events. Stories in which one particular teacher said something stupid some time, a few individual nasty fellow-pupils laughed at you or made you look a fool. Stories about which I could always say, 'Yes, I experienced

that sort of thing in my secondary school or at the seminary.' But every time I hear this kind of separate detail in context, I am shattered. I see that this is nothing to do with individual events which are comparable with my experiences. It is something quite different: it is a perpetually recurring assault on the anyway weak and vulnerable self-esteem of these children. An assault which it is hard to parallel in terms of brutality.

As teachers we can hardly refer back to our own experience. We have had nothing approaching it in our lives. If we had, we wouldn't be teachers. We would be working on an assembly-line somewhere.

Jegge, 1991, p. 85 (translated)

I too, who have never worked on an assembly-line, remember incidents of humiliation at school, as Jegge does. I have described some of them earlier in this book. They never approached the disastrous, uninterrupted sequence that his pupils had suffered, but they were enough to suggest what it might be like. Jegge's first-hand accounts of the destructive effect of some normal educational practices gave me fresh reasons for condemning them, and his record of the therapeutic effect of respect and consideration clarified and reinforced my instinctive sense of their value.

Another author recommended to me by Lotte was Janusz Korczak.

Korczak ran an orphanage for Jewish children in Warsaw in the 1930s. (Eventually he chose to accompany them when they were sent into the gas-chambers at Treblinka, but here I am interested in his educational methods rather than his heroism.) The atmosphere of the orphanage may perhaps be captured in this account of the possible punishments that could be given by the children's court:

The judges [elected by the children] will pardon when someone has done something bad out of foolishness or ignorance. The judges will pardon, if someone has done something bad but has nevertheless tried to put it right again, and he is sorry. The judges will pardon when someone has hit out in anger or as a joke, or when he has done something by mistake, or out of thoughtlessness.

The judges will not pardon when someone will absolutely not obey, doesn't try and doesn't want to improve. Then the judges don't pardon, and impose a punishment.

What sort of punishments will there be?

. . .

When the judges say that someone has done something bad and his action falls under paragraph 1000, then that means that he must leave "Our house" [the orphanage].

When someone gets paragraph 900, then a good child can take him into his care and share responsibility for everything else he does. If no one is willing to take

responsibility for him, he must leave "Our house". That means that he has been expelled. He is not thrown out, he goes of his own free will, because he doesn't want to submit to our laws. Perhaps he will find another home with other arrangements and will feel all right there.

When someone gets paragraph 800, he is excluded from the court for a week, but he can go on living and eating with us, but he is no longer one of us, he is a stranger; but he can stay.

When someone gets paragraph 700 it is explained to him that he has done something wrong, and his mother or his father or his aunt or the whole family will be informed about it.

When someone gets paragraph 600 he has to admit, publicly, on the noticeboard, that he has done wrong.

If he gets 500 he is noted in the wall newspaper.

For 400, they just say he has done something wrong.

300 – he has behaved badly

200 – he has done something wrong

100 – the smallest punishment; the court just says that it can't pardon him.

The Warsaw orphanage has had this court for two years now, and the court has only once sentenced according to paragraph 1000, and only twice as severely as paragraph 600. Because the judges are children themselves and know how hard it is not to misbehave, and they also know that everyone can improve if he only wants to and really tries.

Korczak, 1991, p. 81 - 83 (translated)

What impressed me most about this passage was the way that an elaborate system of punishment had been almost completely abandoned in favour of consequences that amounted to little more than an admission of having done wrong. An ex-pupil of Sands School was more impressed by the last sentence, which she said was the best description that she had ever read of the way a school meeting works. The judges "know how hard it is not to misbehave, and they also know that everyone can improve if he only wants to and really tries." Punishment often stimulates rebelliousness, and so curbs the wish to try to improve. Understanding and sympathy work in the opposite direction. I had had experience of both in the incidents of the broken thermometer at Connaught House and the spent fine money at Eton. They were examples of figures of authority behaving in an unexpected way; in a school meeting such behaviour arises naturally.

In 1996 I began international travel in earnest, and visited, among other places, Sudbury Valley School, in Massachusetts, and the Fundación Educativa Pestalozzi in Ecuador. Both of these schools take a step that was not considered even at Countesthorpe. They have no lessons.

I must qualify that a little. At Sudbury they have no lessons unless an individual or a group demands instruction on some subject. I say 'demands' because asking for it is not going to be enough. You have to be determined. During the four days I was there, there were fewer than ten lessons for a hundred and fifty pupils, and at some of those ten lessons there were only four people, including the staff member.

At the Pesta there is a group of some kind or other working together somewhere in the school almost all the morning, but that is one small group of children who have decided to attend a particular session in a school of almost two hundred.

In both these schools the staff believe that any pressure from an adult is likely to distort a child's development; at the Pesta they do not think it appropriate for adults even to make suggestions or to point things out. The rooms at the Pesta are nevertheless full of educational materials, particularly for the learning of mathematical concepts, while at Sudbury there is little outside the art room, the kitchen and the computer centre except for shelves and shelves of books, a couple of pianos, comfortable chairs, lots of space and whatever the children choose to bring to school with them.

There are a great many rules at Sudbury, but the children nevertheless feel that they are free to do whatever they want. Here are some extracts from *Kingdom of Childhood*, a book of memories of ex-students:

We kind of ate lunch as the day went on or didn't eat it at all. Often we were either too busy and we would eat lunch late, because we'd forget about it; or we'd have a snack at ten and then not eat again until three. . . . Often I ate my lunch in the car on the way home!

Sadovsky and Greenberg, 1994, p. 8 - 9

And it was never boring, I've never been bored a day in my life.

Ibid. p. 13

When I was eleven, I wanted to stay eleven forever.

Ibid. p 13

We had a toboggan my father got for us – it was plastic so it didn't stick – and we would pile about eight or ten or twelve people on it. We would go down the hill, and across the ice when the ice was safe. We would sled all day. We would come in, hang our stuff on all the radiators, and then we would sit on the radiators. Everybody. All

different ages. Oh, it was a blast! For years and years and years that toboggan was going across the snow and ice with a million people on it.

Ibid. p 44

I remember just feeling joy at being at this place where I could do what I wanted where I wanted. The school was physically beautiful, and to be around this beautiful place and not be constrained was wonderful.

Ibid. p. 127 -129

At Sudbury Valley, I had a good childhood. For me, childhood held a deep and abiding sense of wonder: wonder at, and in connection with, the world around you.

Ibid. p. 242

For the most part, I did stuff in *big* blocks of time. I would start each day by continuing what I left off on the day before. So if I was building a tree fort somewhere, I would start again on that tree fort. I would work on the tree fort until I got hungry enough to come in for lunch or, if I was smart enough, I would have brought the lunch to the tree fort in the first place. Ibid. p. 286

I loved to spend as much time outside as I could. One of my favorite spots to go and read was next to the waterfall by the millhouse. I would go for walks with just one other person, and talk. In the building, I loved to be on the window seat in the dance room, and in different quiet rooms, where I would go off by myself and read.

Ibid. p. 296

One of the joys of life is creativity, and at Sudbury Valley they make things. At other schools I know people make music and create in art rooms and write poetry and stories and build huts and camps in the grounds, but in *The Kingdom of Childhood* you can read how children at Sudbury created a whole world of plasticene, accurate to the last nail-hole, how they baked bread and made apple pies, how someone built a tractor and someone made a dark-room, how children created eccentric tricycles with parts retrieved from a junkyard, how they built and repaired computers and cars.

Anyone at Sudbury who becomes fascinated by a subject is able to follow that subject exclusively for as long as they want – days, weeks, months, years. Fishing, astronomy, photography, sledding, home-made fireworks, dissecting dead animals, history, local fauna, rock music, classical music, Magic (the game), gardening, juggling, reading – reading anything from Doctor Doolittle to Dickens, from Steinbeck to Shakespeare, from science fact to science fiction, from encyclopedias to the great Russian novels.

And after these experiences of genuine absorption, many go on to universities. Those who have other interests, choose more appropriate directions.

The Pesta has a convincing argument for this kind of freedom; they say that unless you learn to make choices as a child it will be difficult for you to make sensible choices later. This seems to me to be likely to be true, but it does not necessarily follow that adults should not offer choices.

Sudbury and the Pesta are both widely imitated, the former mainly in the USA and the latter mainly in Austria. I have described them at length in *Real Education*.. I liked both very much when I visited them, but I did not think either of them had the only answer, or indeed the best answer. I preferred, for instance, the Democratic School of Hadera, where I saw a rich and enticing timetable of classes and activities, although there was no pressure to attend any of them. There were staff at Hadera who worried that by putting a topic on the timetable they gave it an importance that could prevent children from following up their own personal interests, but that does not seem to me to be a strong enough argument to justify not offering any adult intervention at all. Though Jeni Smith's students at Countesthorpe were following up their own interests, they had needed her help to discover them.

Mirambika, the Sri Aurobindo school, published a book of guidelines called *Learning with Projects*. It includes this passage:

. . . there is no harm in the teacher giving his own suggestions or ideas on what he is interested to teach or on what he feels would be good for the child to study. Of course one should be careful not to steam-roll as yet unstructured ideas of the children, but on the other hand total passivity from the teacher is neither natural nor desirable. After all the children learn that it is ok to be enthusiastic from teachers who are inspired and overflowing with ideas.

Cornelissen (1991) p. 11

My own personal learning experiences also suggest a positive role for the teacher. When I went to adult education drama classes I did not want the teacher to remain silent, I wanted him to offer us ideas, to set us tasks, to discuss what we did with us after we had done it. At Cambridge I always found the set books less interesting than other books by the same authors and generally found lectures boring, but I enjoyed tutorials and would have liked more of them.

The absence of direction at Sudbury and the Pesta is an extreme version of educational freedom that is attractive partly because it is so absolute. It is also successful, and often helps children who have had problems in other schools.

Rebeca Wild acknowledges that the Pesta is run according to her own insights and those of her husband Mauricio; she says that no one else should try to imitate it exactly because different people will have different feelings; they should not try to imitate, but only to do what seems best to them personally (*Sein zum Erziehen, Nachwort*). Sudbury Valley, on the other hand, is certain that it has discovered the

only right method of education; they no longer attend the IDECs (International Democratic Education Conferences) because they do not feel there is anything more for them to learn.

I very much liked the atmosphere at Sudbury, but it seems to me that if a learner is to learn as effectively as possible, the essential element is not totally independent motivation but personal involvement. Personal involvement implies choice, and a variety of stimuli enriches that choice. Even at the Pesta there is a prepared environment, full of opportunities for investigation and learning. If there is to be real freedom of choice there must be real choices available.

In an ideal school this wealth of choices will probably include seminars or lectures or even conventional lessons, but one of the opportunities must be the opportunity to do what a conventional educator would describe as nothing. In the hostile Inspectors' Report on Summerhill, which gave rise to the official attempt to close the school down, one of the things they objected to was the encouragement of what they saw as "the pursuit of idleness" (OFSTED 1999, Main Finding 12). The concept is self-contradictory: idleness excludes the pursuit of anything. A similar idea would be "the search for boredom": as long as you are searching, you cannot be bored. Officious adults need to remember Wordsworth's view that "we can feed this mind of ours in a wise passiveness." Or, as the less well-known poet William Davies said in a better-known couplet:

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?

In *Learning the Lesson*, a recent television documentary by Smith and Watson that was supportive of democratic education, there was an embarrassing assertion that democratic teachers believed that learning should be 'fun'. There is a dreadful aimlessness about that idea. Learning should be above all purposeful, and it can only be purposeful if the learners have chosen to undertake it. Then most of the time it will also be enjoyable, or exciting, or engrossing, but some of the time it will be routine drudgery; if drudgery is necessary then learners who have chosen to learn will naturally accept it.

Teachers can interfere with this natural motivation by being over-enthusiastic about their own projects, but they can also waste their own talents and interests by never exhibiting them. As long as the children have freedom to choose, I cannot see that there is anything to be lost by adults exhibiting their enthusiasms. The successes at Sudbury and the Pesta mean that they stand among the most important innovative schools in the world. I have a great respect for them, but I lean in a slightly different direction.

Dartington, Summerhill and Sands are more like Hadera than Sudbury and the Pesta, partly because of the British exam system which nowadays has to be negotiated if you are going to enter almost any employment. The students themselves mostly want help in preparation for exams, and accept a fairly ordinary school timetable as a necessary condition for this. On the other hand Sands, conventional though its lessons may be, is unusual in its attitude to rules and punishment. Rules are kept to a minimum, and punishment is almost unknown.

This is by no means universal in progressive, liberal or free schools. The Pesta has a surprising number of rules; no tape-recorders or radios are allowed, for instance, and toy guns are only allowed if they do not make any noise. Sudbury Valley and Summerhill impose punishments as a matter of course. At Summerhill these punishments are given by the School Meeting, at which almost all children and staff are present, and at Sudbury Valley by the Justice Committee, which also consists mostly of children, but nevertheless punishments they are – usually imposed work or restrictions of freedom.

The list of standard punishments at Summerhill is long: pocket-money fines; small, medium or large job fines (cleaning or garden work); tea biscuit fine; share-a-cake fine; back of the lunch queue; back of all queues; getting your name on the Bullies List; screen ban (no TV or computer games); wheels ban (no cycling or skateboarding); and minimum stuff fine, given for leaving your room in a mess, which means you aren't allowed to have anything except a change of clothes, a bit of soap, a towel and a bit of toothpaste on a toothbrush. At Sudbury Valley you may be, for instance, excluded from a particular area, forbidden to join in specified activities, ordered to do extra work around the school or suspended for a certain length of time.

Both these schools have large numbers of rules – literally hundreds of them – and there are naturally frequent breaches. It is commonly thought that if a child breaks a rule there must be a punishment, or otherwise the rule would not have any force. It seems to me that if a child breaks a rule there must be a discussion of the importance of that rule and if it is found that the rule has no relevance it should be dropped. If rules are sensible, children can understand the need for them perfectly well; punishment only encourages rebellion. If children are relied on as sensible people, they want to behave sensibly. Chess-players don't keep to the rules because if they break them they are punished, they keep to the rules because if they didn't there would be no game. People who try to cheat exclude themselves. The same can be said of life in a school.

At the one Justice Committee at Sudbury Valley that I attended the offences discussed were minor, and the only member of the committee who wanted to impose punishments was a member of staff. He was always overruled.

People from Summerhill and Sudbury offer various reasons for the plethora of rules, for instance that adults need to be able to intervene promptly in some situations without having to call a meeting, that rules lead to a sense of security because you know exactly what is allowed and what is not allowed, that children like making rules, that if you have no rules the behaviour in the school depends on the authority of the adults who can decide whatever standards they like or that there are routines involving such things as the conduct of meetings or the booking of certain rooms or washing up after meals that need rules for the sake of efficiency.

Almost everywhere rules creep in, often disguised as tradition or customary behaviour. Sands School started with only two rules, no alcohol and no drugs, but by the end of its first week it had a rule about smoking and now, at the end of its fifteenth year the rules fill two or three pages. There is still very little punishment. From time to time the school meeting may devise a systematic punishment for some particular offence, but generally speaking individual cases are considered individually; the systematic punishment system is usually soon dropped. Very occasionally it is found that a child is unable to make good use of the freedom at the school, and the school meeting decides that he or she must leave.

There are, however, schools that do not use punishment at all. A prospectus for Mirambika, the school in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Delhi, gives these reasons:

Punishment does not help the child to surmount difficulties. It builds walls, creates divisions and an atmosphere in which it is very difficult to listen to the inner truth. Answering negative behaviour of children with restriction means that at that very moment we give up our belief in basic goodness. Let us remember that sometimes a child has to experiment a little with a dark corner in himself in order to consciously choose and own light.

Mirambika, 1994, p 17

At the Barbara Taylor School in New York, Lois Holzman gave me this explanation:

Most schools try to take credit for their children's successes, but blame the children themselves for their failures; when the children fail they punish them by imposing extra work, depriving them of privileges or excluding them from the school. This is inappropriate, because, firstly, we are all responsible for each other, so the failures are the school's, not the child's; secondly, to exclude them is to deprive them of the one environment that is therapeutic for them, and thirdly, people who punish avoid having to discuss, and discussion is what leads to change.

Gribble, 1998, p. 185

David Wills, who ran the Barns Hostel for 'unbilletable' evacuees in Scotland during the Second World War, listed his reasons for avoiding punishment:-

1. It provides a base motive for conduct.
2. It has been tried, and has failed; or alternatively, it has been so mis-used in the past as to destroy its usefulness now.
3. It militates against the establishment of the relationship which we consider necessary between staff and children - a relationship in which the child must feel himself to be loved.
4. Many delinquent children (and adults) are seeking punishment as a means of assuaging their guilt-feelings.
5. When the offender has "paid for" his crime, he can "buy" another with an easy conscience.

Wills, 1945, p. 22

These reasons were familiar to me, and convincing in themselves, but in another context he gives further reason which when I first read it I found astonishing.

'Punishment,' says David Wills, 'shifts the responsibility for behaviour onto the adult, instead of leaving it with the child.' (Wills, 1942)

I could not see what he meant, until I realised that the idea could be illustrated simply by my experiences at Lawrence Weston. The staff who were willing to punish and skilful in the use of punishment were also able to teach successfully. The fact that my classes were disorderly was my fault, not the children's. In his early career David Wills himself had had the experience of controlling boys by physically dominating them, and had enjoyed the sense of power it gave him, but he came to see that all the boys learnt from this was that it was better to give way to superior strength. They did not learn how to make decisions for themselves, or to accept responsibility for the mistakes that they made.

Perhaps the most inspiring account I have read of a punishment-free system is in David Horsburgh's description of Neel Bagh, the school he ran in a deprived rural area near Bangalore.

No punishments are given, either as a retaliation for some supposed offense, or as a deterrent to a future one; nor is there a school council to award punishments which the teacher does not like to give himself.

Perhaps the natural motivation which the children from Neel Bagh seem to possess in full measure stems from:

- a loving relationship between teachers and children;
- interesting and enjoyable materials;

- materials which are geared to the attainments and abilities of each individual child and not to a mythical class average, and which, therefore, the child in most cases is able to use successfully;
- constant and cheerful encouragement;
- freedom for the child to choose the kind of work he would like to do at any particular moment, although in effect this is modified by the timetable. It means, in practice, that while the child is encouraged to do English in the English period (unless he wants to play under the trees) he is free in that period to choose any English activity that he wishes;
- frequent new intellectual experiences;
- every child is normally a teacher or helper of other children;
- every activity is meant to be, and is, enjoyable for both the children and for the staff.

(Horsburgh, 1984)

Most of the children who attended this school, who went on to become, among other things, doctors and teachers, had parents who could not read.

From all this it has become clear to me that though some generally agreed rules may be useful, punishment is unnecessary. Since, as well as being unnecessary, punishment often creates hostility and always sets a bad example by the deliberate imposition of suffering, it is to be avoided.

I have visited schools with widely differing degrees of freedom, and nevertheless admired even the strictest because of the relationship between staff and students. At one end of the scale stands the Doctor Albizu Campos Puerto Rican High School in Chicago, where the young people trying to escape from the gang culture all around them welcome clear requirements and a conventional timetable.

Another school with a rigid timetable is Sumavanam, on the edge of a rural village, near Bangalore. Children are allowed to come to the school as soon as they are able to walk there by themselves. I was taken to visit the home of one of the family of one of the girls at the school; six people were living in a small mud hut with no windows and no furniture. At school they sit on concrete floors and study from the only books the school can afford, which are old-fashioned and for the most part dull.

The following paragraph is taken from *Real Education*:-

Children at Sumavanam are free to come, or not to come, to any class, but every child wants to come. It is an insult to be told 'Go out and play, because you seem distracted.' Even though no homework is set, the children want to come back in the evenings and

carry on with what they have been doing during the day. One of the older boys sits with the younger ones to help them and to maintain an atmosphere of industry, but he is only there because they asked for the arrangement to be made. To be deprived of their homework time is regarded as a punishment. There are theoretically school holidays three times a year, to coincide with periods of maximum activity on the land, such as sowing and harvest, but when I visited the school there had been no holiday taken for seventeen weeks.

Gribble, 1998, p. 122

It is the atmosphere that matters rather than the system.

At the other extreme in terms of freedom stands Tokyo Shure. It is a school for school-refusers, so if you are a pupil there you do not have to attend at all: you only go if you want to. Pupils may attend very seldom when they are new, but when they have seen what enjoyable things there are to do, regained their confidence and understood that they will be treated respectfully they will probably come every day.

To see this actually happening confirmed my view that children who feel themselves to be free and trusted will want to learn – something that now seems to me to be so obvious that it hardly needs confirmation.

When I talk of Dartington and Sands to people who don't approve of allowing children freedom they say, " Oh well, it's all very well for the children of the liberal middle class, but what would happen if you tried it with the underprivileged?" In my first journeys visiting schools around the world after I had retired I saw it working not only in state schools open to all ordinary children, but also in the Schulen in Kleingruppen, in Switzerland, which took children who had been given up as hopeless even by special schools, and I had seen it working at Sumavanam; I had read about the work of David Horsburgh at Neel Bagh.

I had written about Neel Bagh, Sumavanam and the Schulen in Kleingruppen in *Real Education*, but I still could not exorcise the fear that perhaps the kind of education I favoured was primarily an education for the privileged. I determined to visit more schools and to write another book that would finally decide the issue for me.

This book is called *Lifelines*, and its first subject is the Barns Hostel, near Edinburgh, which was run as a home for unbilletable evacuees during the second world war. They were unbilletable because they arrived so dirty and obstreperous and foul-mouthed and dishonest and generally unmanageable that no ordinary family could be expected to take them in. The hostel was in the charge of a Quaker, David Wills, who wrote the passage about punishment that I have quoted earlier in this chapter. (I wrote first that it was 'run by' David Wills, but in fact for a period of eight months it was actually run in an orderly and effective way by the evacuees

themselves.) After an initial period of chaos, things ran smoothly, in spite of the difficult background of the boys, and a visitor commented, 'The outstanding thing about the Home is the happiness and the harmony that prevail. It is in fact entirely a home spelt with a small h. There is no trace of Institution about it. The staff and children are friends and equals.' (Frank Mathews, 1944)

David Wills attributed his success to love. "First and foremost and all the time," he wrote in his book, *The Barns Experiment*, "the children must feel themselves to be loved." And he expanded on this as follows:

For when I speak of love I do mean love – I mean the kind of feeling a parent has for his children. I do not mean the esteem which a child can earn from the adults in its environment by being 'a good boy'. I do not mean the benign and somewhat affectionate feeling that a teacher might feel for his class when everything is going steadily forward. The kind of thing I am thinking of has no relation to the behaviour of the child, and is not influenced by it. It cannot be bought with goodness nor lost by misbehaviour. . . . It is not just a matter of being 'awfully fond of children'. Anyone can be that. It is a matter of being 'awfully fond' of Johnny Jones whose table manners are nauseating (he sits opposite you and crams as much food into his mouth as he possibly can; this he chews with his big mouth wide open; presently he lets out a loud guffaw, ejecting his breath powerfully through his overfull and open mouth . . .); it is a matter of being 'awfully fond' of Willie Smith whose nose is usually in a condition such as to make one retch almost every time one sees it; it is a matter of being 'awfully fond' of Tommy Green, who has all these failings and a foul and nasty disposition thrown in. It consists of loving this Tommy Green in spite of all that, of making him feel that this affection is always there, is something on which he can absolutely rely, which will never fail, whatever he may do. It consists of establishing a relationship such that, however much the child may wound his own self-esteem, he cannot damage the esteem in which we hold him.

Wills, 1945, p. 64

I was not able to visit the Barns Hostel because it had closed long ago, but the other three places in the book I did go to see.

The first of these was the Doctor Pedro Albizu Campos Puerto Rican High School in Chicago. What I want to emphasise here is neither its methods nor its success, but the contrast between the atmosphere in the school and the background of the students. They came from a world of gangs – gangs who sold drugs and fought for their territory with guns. The so-called 'soldiers' were the youngest; even ten- and eleven-year-olds would kill and be killed. Whether a young person belonged to a gang or not, the streets were dangerous and the police were hostile. Girls who wished to join the gangs might have to submit to rape, sometimes multiple rape, sometimes on a regular basis.

Outside the school there were also problems with racism, and problems with the police. Ada Rivera, one of the students, told me this:

I've been affected by racism, especially with police. Police pull us over in our neighbourhood, and I've had male cops try to search me because they think I'm stupid and I don't know my rights. And when I tell them "Look, I know my rights, you can't even do this to me," they threaten to hit me. I've had cops purposely mess with me because I was wearing a shirt that has all the Puerto Rican political prisoners on the back. We were all standing outside, and the cop came and pulled us over. The guys were all on their knees. They told all the guys to kneel down and put their hands on their heads and all the girls were standing up, and when they saw my shirt they were like "All of youse too, get down too!" And all the girls had to go on their knees too, and they started reading my shirt and they started like messing with me, and they were like "So when are you going to add your name to the back of the shirt?" I've lived through a lot of drama with police and racism, and even with my teachers. My teachers just used to tell me "Well, you're Puerto Rican, why don't you just stay at home and make babies?"

Gribble, 2004, p. 44

There was a compulsory timetable of conventional lessons. The students who came had to cope with strong anti-educational influence. In the gangs they could find companionship and sex and they could make large sums of money. At the High School they cut themselves off from the old culture and they earned nothing. The timetable and the curriculum were rigid because the staff felt the students needed a clear structure to compensate for their structureless background, and the students accepted it gladly. In spite of the rigidity, the atmosphere was informal, cheerful, affectionate and co-operative. There was plenty of laughter and even horseplay – I saw the present head wrestling in the corridor with one of her students, both of them laughing helplessly.

Lynette and I spent a week at Moo Baan Dek, a children's village in Thailand. Some of the children here are orphans; the others have been abused or abandoned. They are any age from two to eighteen. The community is run on A. S. Neill principles, interpreted from a Buddhist point of view. Pibhop and Rajani Dhongchai were the founders; while we were there it seemed that Rajani had the major responsibility for the school while Pibhop worked on other aspects of the Foundation for Children that they have set up.

They have difficulty in keeping staff, because not many Thais understand the principles on which the school is run, and adults are unwilling to accept that they must obey the same rules as the children. The continuity of the place depends therefore partly on Rajani, but also to a great extent on the children, some of whom have lived in the village for more than ten years. It is not a village run by adults for

children, it is truly a children's village which children, with the help of adults, run for themselves.

The atmosphere is relaxed and yet there is an understanding that certain things have to be done. One day Lynette and I were invited out to the rice-fields to join in with the harvesting of the rice for a short time. The work was done by the teenagers, and some time before midday the tempo slowed and people began to drift off to the area where lunch was being cooked over a camp fire. There was absolutely no feeling that anyone was slacking. Rajani told us that their bodies told them that they needed rest, and it was proper for them to obey their natural needs. Work started after lunch in much the same informal way as it had stopped beforehand. Children began to go back to the fields again, some to continue reaping, and the bigger boys to collect the sheaves and stack them in the lorry. There was no need for anyone to tell the children what to do.

In all this, and in much else that we saw at Moo Baan Dek there seemed to be a natural order. And this had developed in a community of children who had suffered terribly. Here is an extract from an account by Rajani and Pibhop, written on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the school:-

Some of those children came from the slum under the Bangkok-Noi Bridge, some from the Klong-Toey slum, and from other slums in Bangkok. The forms of violence included not only beating with brooms but also cutting with small fruit-knives, stamping with the feet, washing open wounds with salt water and forcing beaten children to sit in smoke. One of the most severe cases came from the Klong-Toey slum. The child was often hit on the head with a fruit knife, which caused brain damage and nervous disorders. The worst case was a little girl who was raped since she was three and had contracted syphilis. She was afraid of men and darkness, was always fearful, and often screamed when left in the dark. Her defences were abusive language and destructive behaviour; she would bully anyone weaker. Some children from the country were beaten as well, and some were put into jars and dumped into rivers.

The reason we often had this kind of children was because their parents did not want them. The parents blamed the children for their misbehaviour; they believed it was the children's doing, and not the result of their own actions. Even raped children were thought to have asked for it. Children were believed to be bad.

Dhongchai and Dhongchai, 1997, p. 46-47

Even children from backgrounds like these soon learnt to understand the atmosphere at Moo Baan Dek, and to protect it and preserve it.

The fourth organisation that we visited was Butterflies. On a previous visit to Delhi I had been so horrified by the poverty that I had not ever wanted to return, but when Lynette and I went back and spent a week with the street educators at

Butterflies who were doing something positive to help the children suffering from this poverty, I was not horrified but inspired.

Our guide and interpreter for most the time was Ishani Sen, who had been teaching at Mirambika when I visited it some years earlier. On our first day she took us to see the railway station, where children slept on the roofs. She stopped to talk to two boys there who appeared to be about ten years old. They were smiling and friendly, and waved goodbye to us when we walked on. Ishani told us that when the street educators meet such children, formal education is not the priority. The priority is to make each child feel trusted, secure and precious. Only then can formal learning take place. When you consider that the children are frequently driven away by the adult porters and attacked by the police without provocation, it is astonishing that this trust can be established. Perhaps it is helped by the fact that sometimes, when they try to intervene, the Butterflies adults get beaten by the police as well.

During the week that Lynette and I spent there we took part in a workshop run by Amin, aged sixteen, and Anuj, aged fourteen, who had attended a ten-day Save the Children workshop in Kathmandu on 'Training of Facilitators on Children, Citizenship and Governance' and wanted to pass on what they had learnt. It took place on a wide lawn in a churchyard and was attended by about thirty children and sixteen adults. We played various games in teams. We divided up into small groups for discussions, where children who not long ago had been illiterate took notes, so that they could report back to the full group later. The children prepared short plays to show the group while the adults made up a song. There was a break for lunch and a break for tea, and the event ran for five hours.

The important point, though, is not the impressive way Amin and Anuj organised the occasion, but the fact that, although sometimes adults and children or males and females were separated for particular activities, there was no doubt that we all had equal status. This was made absolutely obvious in the games which involved pushing and shoving, or clustering into one tight group – there was no self-consciousness or holding back. One of the street educators commented afterwards, 'The educators' role in this workshop was very good, as it showed that we have less power.' And this was achieved with a group that consisted mainly of street children who were regarded by most adults as pickpockets, beggars and sexual prey, that included adults of different castes, from the highest to the lowest and that accepted two elderly, pale-skinned foreigners who spoke no Hindi as equal participants, shoving, pushing and clustering just like everyone else.

The children work for their living helping stall-keepers in the markets, cleaning shoes, carrying bags and collecting rubbish for recycling. The Butterflies street educators set up agreed contact points where they come at a certain time every day. The contact points are mostly in the open air, in markets and parks, and the street

educators bring with them a trunk containing slates and chalk, posters, games and a few books. Children take whatever they want to use and then work or play for up to three hours at a stretch. They come when they want to, but they have to want to come very badly, because every hour they spend with the street educators is an hour of earning time lost; if they are working from home this may mean a beating, and if they are living in the street it may mean hunger.

As well as learning reading, writing and basic maths they organise themselves into campaigning groups to protect their rights, they produce a wall newspaper, do street theatre and hold regular meetings. I saw many groups of different sizes working with adults or under the direction of one of the older children, but the actual learning to read and write is done individually, without any group or adult pressure at all. Whatever pressure there is, comes from outside Butterflies, and is against giving the children time to learn, yet the children are determined to resist that pressure because they want to learn so badly. They work often from old-fashioned books (though Butterflies is producing appropriate new material) and they work in the old-fashioned way. The street educators call it 'non-formal education' because there is no formal structure, but much of the learning material is as formal as you would find anywhere.

This shows the essence of useful education once again. You can work in a classroom or out on the street, you can have lessons or no lessons, you can teach whole classes or you can have everyone working independently, you can use the latest modern teaching aids or have children writing with chalk on slates, but what matters is that staff and students must have a mutual affection and respect.

The Butterflies children do not expect to live long; when they were offered one hundred per cent interest per year on any money they saved, they turned it down, because they did not know whether they would survive long enough to gain from it.

I asked Rita Panicker, the founder and leader of Butterflies, how she judged the success of the programme. Success, she said, is when the children trust the adults. Only then do other things follow. It is success when children learn to read and write, even though they may get no academic qualifications; it is success when they succeed in personal projects, such as research, or finding a solution to a problem. And of course it is a success if they go on to high school and get good jobs. Four from this last category, who, according to Rita, had been very strong and difficult personalities, are now working for Butterflies.

Although the children's two major fears, as discovered by a survey undertaken by Butterflies, are the police and drunken adults who may beat them, there are many other problems. This is an extract from one of the Butterflies wall newspapers, written by the children and printed in Hindi and English:

It is that under the pretext of Hindi films they [the managers of the cheap all-night cinemas where children sometimes take refuge] also show blue films. These X-rated films are not shown on fix times. They are shown in between the films for sometimes or generally in night after 2.00 a.m. or 3.00 a.m. for 30 to 35 minutes.

Most of the times children are sexually abused in these halls at Power House and Peti Market. At the hall, there are both adults and children therefore during blue films the grown ups get hold of the children for sex due to fear children do not object and even if they do and ask for help no one helps them including the owner of the hall. Sometimes children also willingly do with the adults. In winters this act is done easily under a sheet or a quilt in darkness no one knows who is doing what and also due to winters it is more crowded.

[The staff] of Butterflies have many times talked about these wrong deeds to the police, but it was of no help. If a strict police officer comes, the halls are closed for some days but then they are again started. Due to this it seems that hall owners and police have a good understanding that's why police remains silent and police do not punish such people.

Bal Mazdoor Ki Awaz, 2000

Even in a society where these things are commonplace, the Butterflies street educators are loved and trusted, and the children who go to them are honest, self-confident and eager to learn.

Rita Panicker, who founded Butterflies, said to me, 'I think we should allow children to develop and come up with their own fora. It can take any shape that it needs. But to make miniature adult organisations of children, that bothers me a bit. When I hear words like "children's parliament" it bothers me. Did the children say that they wanted a parliament?'

And a little later in the same conversation, when talking about the culture she had been brought up in, she said, 'And one of the socialisations that has taken place, at least personally I can talk about myself, is that elders tell you, they never consult. They talk at you, so every day you have to ask yourself, "Did I consult the children? Did I listen to what they were saying? Or was I just hearing a little bit and then making my own decisions?" And that, I think, personally, I have to do it every day. It's not something that comes so naturally to one, because one was not brought up that way.'

I was not brought up that way either, and it took me a long time to reach that position.

What impressed me over and over again in my journeys round the world was that everywhere, even in a country like India where the old caste system is still influential, there are people who have come to the same conclusions as I have – that

the most important elements in an adult's relationship with children are honesty, affection, trust and humility. Affection and trust are simple concepts, but what I mean by honesty and humility may need to be explained.

Humility does not imply self-abasement, but merely lack of arrogance. It is difficult, as Rita Panicker says, for adults to talk with children rather than at them. We have not been brought up to believe in treating children with a proper respect, but the rewards of doing so are great.

The special meaning of honesty is more elaborate. Telling the truth is only a small part of it. Honesty means, among other things, not being afraid to be yourself – not being ashamed of being bad at games (or maths, or music, or whatever else). It was part of what I had learnt from Jenny, my first wife. She also taught me that honesty means accepting what is real instead of cloaking it in formalities and conventions – not worrying about wearing smart clothes and standing up when a visitor enters the room; honesty means not using your status to impose authority, but listening, arguing, accepting differences, being ready to change your mind – not assuming that as an adult you can step in and sort out the problems of an unhappy three-year-old; honesty means not being ashamed of your natural altruism – valuing kindness above happiness, trying harder to care for those who feel rejected, stacking your neighbour's logs. Honesty means having no respect for authority, and depending on common sense rather than rules, as Andrew Edwards said at Sands. Honesty means, in the words of Carol Gilligan, living by a morality of caring rather than a morality of justice.

Few adults are capable of this, because it has been educated out of them. What amazed me and inspired me in my journeys around the world was that in so many different countries and in such extremely different cultures there were places of education where this kind of honesty flourished. If people in all these countries, and in all these cultures, have independently come to the same conclusions, it means that schools like Summerhill and Sands are not monumental eccentricities, but tiny parts of a spontaneous, world-wide movement.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AND WHAT WAS IT ALL FOR?

Teaching has surprisingly little to do with learning.

My son Toby, at the age of seven, observed, 'My teacher taught me to read when I was five, but it didn't work.' John Holt's book, *How Children Fail*, is full of examples of teaching that hasn't worked. For all the people who say, "I was never any good at maths," maths-teaching hasn't worked. for my fellow-linguists at Cambridge who read the English introductions rather than the foreign texts, language-teaching hadn't worked. For me, history-teaching didn't work.

Failures of this kind can be remedied. Toby was perfectly well able to read when he was eight. Understanding maths teachers can bring sudden enlightenment. In the end I taught myself to play the piano.

What is more disturbing is that bad teaching can put people off learning for ever. School killed history for me and almost killed science and music. It destroyed *Oliver Twist* and *Twelfth Night*. Yet I was academically successful; for those with no academic bent the results are much more wide-reaching – they may turn against all learning of any kind.

The men who taught me Latin and Greek taught me enough to pass exams, but I know little of either language now. It is not what you are obliged to learn that stays with you, but what you want to learn.

Without instruction at either school or university I learnt the following:

- how to accompany my own songs on the guitar, how to play the double bass and the sax and how to write music down for other people to play;
- a fair amount about early and mainstream jazz, and how to read a chord sequence;
- a bit of philosophy, a bit of psychology and a bit about cultural differences;
- how to program in old-fashioned BASIC and LOGO, and how to use word-processing, the internet, etc.;
- crossword composition;
- a lot about alternative education around the world.

I have demonstrated this learning by performing to other people, playing in school jazz-bands, and writing a few books; I have also written a good many articles, and a dozen or more musicals for children and others for a local amateur group. And I have given talks in several different countries.

Friends of all ages have helped me when I needed help, but no one set me to learn any of these things, I chose them for myself. I never felt I was working at them; I did them because I wanted to.

I have also learnt how to put up adequate book-shelves, prime and paint them and clean the brush afterwards, and I have learnt to cook basic meals. For me these skills are not pleasures in themselves, but they have pleasing practical results. I learnt them mainly by imitation, trial and error and reading the instructions on the packets and cans. They were not on the curriculum at Eton.

I have recently been thinking about the ways in which my experience of being taught actually hindered my later learning, even in subjects that attracted me. In spite of discouragement from my music teachers, for instance, my musical plays are scored for several instruments, and include songs with two or more interwoven melodic lines. But, and this is an enormous but, I cannot sing from written music, and I cannot play even the simplest tune by ear without any number of false starts. In this respect my musical education succeeded in crippling me. I learnt that all music was an intellectual exercise, involving decoding written signs. When I first heard that New Orleans jazz was played without anything being written down I found it hard to believe.

I can't play by ear, but when I am extemporising I usually know what it is going to sound like before I play it. My explanation of this is that my teachers concentrated so hard on the left side of the brain that it is always interfering when I try to play some tune that I can hear perfectly clearly in my head. I try to work out intervals and names of notes instead of allowing my fingers to do the work. When my fingers are leading, I seem to be able to play without thinking.

The people who taught me languages achieved a similar effect. I learnt to read books with a dictionary and to conjugate irregular verbs, but I didn't actually learn to speak French and German until I went to the relevant countries after leaving school. Even at Cambridge we did very little oral work.

Later I kept up with the languages largely by teaching them, mostly at an elementary level, and by reading a book or two a year in French or German. This was just as well, as in my retirement I have several times been invited to give talks about my views on education in both languages. Before I go to give a talk abroad I brush up my knowledge of the language by a technique I call two-way translation. I take a book that interests me and each day I translate a passage into English, and translate the previous day's passage back into the original language. I can then correct my mistakes from the original without needing a teacher to help me. I take care not to overstretch myself – a mistake in every line means I have been too ambitious. It is similar to the work I had to do at school – translation and re-

translation – and it is only moderately effective; I still have to spend several days in the country before I can speak fluently again.

I am interested in languages. In preparation for visiting schools in relevant countries I have also learnt some Spanish, some beginners' Russian and a very little Japanese. At school I did about eight years of Latin and two or three years of Ancient Greek. They took up almost half the timetable. I still know more Latin than Russian, but I feel I know even less Greek than Japanese (although I know the whole Greek alphabet, and hardly any Japanese characters). Had I learnt Russian and Japanese at school I would probably still be using them.

Spanish and Russian were intended to be useful for visits to schools in Ecuador and Moscow. I started both languages with teach-yourself courses. When I had completed two different beginners' courses in Spanish I arranged for individual conversation with Maria Knowlton, a local teacher who came from Peru. Before each session I wrote something relevant to my proposed visit, which she corrected for me, and then we chatted about what I had written. In three months I had learn enough to ask the kind of question I wanted to ask, and, as long as the reply was fairly slow, to understand the answer.

My experience with Russian was very different. Russian is of course a more difficult language, with its own alphabet and even more cases for nouns than there are in Latin. Nevertheless, I taught myself to read the alphabet and enjoyed working through some television programmes. Then I made an agreement with a Russian woman that she should come to stay with us for six weeks to learn English, and that in exchange she should give me Russian lessons. It was not a success. On the one hand she made me start again from a book where the first pages were all variations on 'What that? That book. What on table? Pencil. Where chair? Chair by window,' and on the other she presented me with *The Queen of Spades* in Russian, in which I could barely make out one word per line. (The fact that Russian does not have any articles and seldom uses pronouns or the verb 'to be' means that texts have few encouragingly familiar words for the beginner.) When I failed to make progress she told me I was lazy, and when I made a list of schools for her proposed visit to Austria, all written out in Russian hand-writing, she thought someone else must have done it for me. The experience of being presented with boring work that was far below my level at the same time as being continually expected to do things that I could not do and having my few successes ignored, discouraged me so much that I gave up Russian altogether, and I have never visited Moscow.

Comparing my experiences of learning Spanish and Russian has confirmed many of the opinions I had formed in schools. Criticism, especially misplaced criticism, does not stimulate further effort but results in discouragement or even despair. Chatting, as I chatted with my Peruvian teacher, exercised exactly the skills I needed; chatting was interesting and enjoyable, whereas the irrelevant instruction I received

in Russian did not merely fail, it created antipathy. I even have the impression that I actually knew less Russian after my six weeks of lessons than I had known before, though I don't think this can really be true.

Nowadays I hear of teachers who make it possible for their pupils to talk about what they want to talk about right from the very beginning – not 'What that?' 'That book,' but 'How is your Mum?' 'She's getting better.' It gives the opportunity to use body language, facial expression and gesture, and it gives the language real importance. The difference of approach in my Russian and Spanish lessons showed me how effective this is.

I use my French and German often, and I have used my Spanish for a fascinating week at a school in Ecuador, and for occasional efforts at translation. My one or two sentences of Japanese (learnt from the first few lessons of a teach-yourself course) have been enough to win me merry approval. Russian, Greek and Latin, studied for respectively three months, three years and eight years, have served me very little.

In an earlier chapter I gave examples of the sort of poetry I had learnt before I went to school, and when I was there. I don't read a lot of poetry, but nevertheless I have since acquired an anthology of fragments of varying lengths. Most of *Ozymandias*, part of 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan,' all of *On stopping by the woods on a snowy evening*, lots of lines by Shakespeare, some of Ted Hughes – 'This house has been far out at sea all night,' 'The wood was like a wood struggling through a wood,' 'A pig's bite is worse than a horse's. It can take a half-moon clean out,' and then 'Dawn points and another day prepares for heat and silence,' and 'The very deep did rot. Oh, Christ! That ever this should be,' and 'Everyone suddenly burst out singing,' and 'I used to think that grown-ups chose to have stiff backs and wrinkles round their nose,' and 'My parents kept me from children who were rough,' and 'What is a woman, that you forsake her, and the hearth fire, and the home-acre, to go with the old grey widow-maker?' and 'The old lie – Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori,' and so on and so on.

I haven't checked these quotations on purpose, because they have taken up residence in my mind as I have written them, without my ever having made any effort to learn them. I have presumably read them or heard them several times, and they have just stayed with me. I didn't need a teacher to require me to learn so many lines each week and recite them back to him.

My attitude to religion has changed slowly.

Jenny and I were married in church. I remember nothing about the service. We had our children baptised, because of Pascal's bet – if it's true that baptism saves you from eternal damnation it is important to have it done, and if it's not true it doesn't matter.

When Jenny was ill in hospital the vicar of Dartington came for a while to sit with me. It was the first time that I realised that she was probably dying. I valued his presence and his tactful silence, and I have been impressed by the good work done by vicars for other people.

I was pleased at her funeral that the service was so uncompromising. Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust. I thought I remembered a passage about the rivers having ceased to flow and the seas having dried up, which described my feelings, but I have not been able to find it again in the ordinary service.

Lynette and I were also married in church. I remember nothing about that wedding service, either. We continued with the custom of baptism. We went to church at Christmas.

When I was in my forties I was still anxious to make some sort of sense of Christianity. I even wrote my own interpretation of the Lord's Prayer. Here are a few extracts:

The Lord's Prayer has just seemed to me to have an entirely up-to-date meaning that I had never seen before. It seems to be a prayer that I myself wish to pray – *the* prayer that I myself wish to pray, and not only I, but all the people who are trying to improve the lot of others, or help people, or make the world a better place.

Our Father – the being to whom our behaviour is as foolish, as irritating and as important as a child's is to a father. We are foolish, we are exasperating, but we matter.

Thy kingdom come. This is the sentence that first struck me. 'Thy kingdom' is the time when we are a part of all that is right and good – it is when all our good hopes and ambitions are fulfilled, when spiritual tripping is real and earnest, when good triumphs. And that happens when the next plea is fulfilled.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. I used to feel that 'thy will' represented some sort of set of moral laws, that had to be obeyed, possibly reluctantly. It now seems that what we all want most of all is for the will of God to be done, and for God's kingdom to come, and for earth to be like heaven, where God is. In our best moments we are all trying to do God's will, not because we feel we ought to, but because we want to.

Lead us not into temptation. I used to feel that this sentence and the next were a bit feeble – that we ought to be eager to resist temptation, and withstand evil. But it would hardly be heavenly if we had to spend all our time doing that. We do not want to be tempted again, as Adam was tempted. We do not want to be misled by false doctrines. We are not clever enough to manage on our own.

This embarrasses me now, but at least I never tried to teach religion to children.

I developed a superficial interest in other religions than Christianity. This was brought to an end by Trevor Ravenscroft, who told me how he had organised a colloquium of representatives of different religions for the Shah of Persia. He said that it took all a person's childhood and adolescence and a whole social environment to begin to understand any of the world's great religions, and so Westerners were never going to make a success of becoming Buddhists or Muslims. Westerners who called themselves Buddhists were merely playing games.

The idea of obedience, which is central to most religions, became more and more alien to me. It is no good being obedient in the abstract, you have to be obedient to something or someone, and how do you know who or what to obey?

Religions have their adherents trapped by the same argument as anthroposophists or other cultists. If you don't understand, the argument runs, that means that you have not learnt enough to understand, you are not sufficiently enlightened. You must listen to those who do understand, that is to say the figures of authority in our organisation.

Prayer, too, seems an immoral concept. It is one thing to centre one's thoughts on the victims of suffering or one's hopes for the future, but quite another to ask for divine intervention, even in order to achieve excellent objectives. It may be comforting to do so, but it is actually an abdication of responsibility.

It has become clearer and clearer to me that children have a basis for moral behaviour that is nothing to do with religion. Many of the kindest children I have known had never had any religious instruction; at least two of the most troubled had had religion forced on them by their parents.

I found that adults who claimed to be Christian seemed to feel free to ignore all the more demanding biblical precepts. I have already mentioned the visiting preacher at Repton School who actually chose as his text, 'Go, and sell that thou hast, and give the money to the poor,' and started his sermon by saying, 'This of course does not mean that we should sell all that we have and give our money to the poor.' Margaret Thatcher, in her address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1988, actually managed to turn the injunction to love thy neighbour as thyself into a justification for hating other people, because she sometimes found she hated herself for mistakes she had made. During World War II I was taught that "Thou shalt not kill" did not mean "Thou shalt not kill," but only "Thou shalt not commit murder."

I eventually realised when I was almost sixty years old that there was no point in going to church because I did not believe in the ceremonies that were conducted there. This was difficult, because I think we need ceremonies for weddings and

funerals, and the church does them well. However hymns and psalms, holy communion and baptism, reciting the creed and the general confession no longer meant anything to me.

I was not taught this point of view. I don't remember ever reading anything significant about agnosticism. It is a result of the general rejection of authority that found its first timid expression in my rejection of some of the cultural standards at Eton, and has been gradually developing ever since. Rather than being the result of teaching it is a result of the rejection of teaching.

I now believe that it is impossible to have any knowledge about the existence or non-existence of God. All we can know is that it is a natural wish to diminish suffering and increase joy, it is from this wish that all truly moral behaviour stems and whenever we achieve these aims, even on a tiny scale, we feel satisfaction.

I was twenty-seven when I went to Dartington, and it was not only a mild Church of England Christianity I brought with me. I had still not rejected many of the other myths that I had been taught at school – the myths about social behaviour. It was not until I reached Dartington that I met children who had never had to learn them. I envied those children their confidence, their happiness and their authenticity. Oliver Postgate, though, who was at school at Dartington, furiously resented not having been taught at least a few of the lessons I so deplore. When I asked him whether he would contribute to *That's All, Folks*, he sent me an edited version of a passage from his autobiography, *Seeing Things*:

I left the school in 1942, happily assuming that my personal acceptability in social circles would be decided by the relevance of my thinking and the value of my opinions and contributions. So, liking to be helpful, I would eagerly contribute useful ideas to any discussion and occasionally go out of my way to tell people useful things - like, for instance, how to do their jobs.

My happy assumption could not have been further from the truth. Without knowing it I had been let out into a world which, in 1942, was far more rigid and intolerant than it is today, a world in which my acceptability was going to be decided by how diligently I observed certain infinitely delicate nuances of behaviour by which I was expected to signal my appreciation of the worth and position of my betters and thereby, in their charity, be accorded my place - something I signally failed to do, and duly took the consequences.

What was causing me most confusion at the time was that I hadn't the slightest idea what I was doing wrong. I mean: if you choose to deliberately flout convention and ignore the manners and mores of society, then at least you know what you are doing and know what to expect. But, if you do so inadvertently, if you are just trying to be ordinarily friendly and helpful in a way that you have hitherto been allowed to assume

is acceptable, and you come to discover that for some unknown reason this makes you poisonous, then you really don't know where you are. All you do know is that because you can't see anything wrong with what you are doing, there has to be something inherently unacceptable about who you are. And that is not just a recipe for discontent, it is a recipe for long-term misery.

Postgate, 2000, p 67, edited and expanded by Postgate

Many young people emerging from the kind of education I favour have had similar experiences, but they have usually been able to learn from them without suffering Oliver Postgate's 'long-term misery'. What I find particularly sad about his account is the second-last sentence – 'All you do know is that because you can't see anything wrong with what you are doing, there has to be something inherently unacceptable about who you are.' He did not realise that there was another possibility – that there might have been something inherently unacceptable about the world in which he found himself.

I arrived in the adult world with a disadvantage that was an opposite to Oliver Postgate's. Rather than feeling that I deserved any kind of respect, I believed that I was, as an individual, at the bottom of the hierarchy; for status I had to depend on the fact that I was an Old Etonian and generally knew the necessary class conventions.

The result of this opposite disadvantage was much the same. All my life I have been terrified of not knowing how I am expected to behave. Like Oliver Postgate, I feel that if I behave otherwise on purpose, that is all right, but if I behave otherwise by mistake, it is deeply humiliating. To take some trivial examples, I hate tipping, because I never know for certain whether it is appropriate and if it is appropriate how much I should give. Like many other men I would rather wander round lost for a while than ask anybody the way. I am haunted by the feeling that I ought to know. I still have little shocks of horror when I remember the time I was asked to chair a meeting before I knew how to do so, or when I was enrolled as crew in a dinghy race merely because I was the only person available, and didn't even know where to sit.

Oliver Postgate had learnt at Dartington that he deserved respect, and was shocked when he did not get it. I had learnt that I did not deserve respect, and was only too ready to have that perception confirmed.

When I was well over thirty I still found myself lying to keep out of trouble. I had been volunteered to lay a course for some bloodhound trials. My route was pointed out to me, and I was told not to go along any roads, because the bloodhounds couldn't follow a track over tarmac. I set off and unfortunately lost my sense of direction and soon came to a road. I needed to see where I was, so I ran along the road, up to a high point from which I could see where I was supposed to be going. I went back down the road, tried to join up with my old trail, and went off again in

the right direction. The bloodhounds which had to follow my trail followed it up the road I had run along, and then lost it. I was asked by one of the officials whether I had in fact run along the road, and because I had been told not to I said I hadn't. I still feel ashamed, but it was just the sort of thing that happens at school. School discipline trains us to lie to protect ourselves.

Perhaps I would have told the same lie even if I had never been to school, but before I went to school I had been conscientious about telling the truth. The trouble was that I had been persuaded to take part in the world of bloodhound trails, which was completely unfamiliar to me, and the situation called back the many times at school that I had been expected to conform to customs that no one had explained. The only important thing was to fit in, to fit in, to fit in, and when you failed to fit in through ignorance or bewilderment you had to try to deny it. Oliver Postgate would probably have behaved more honorably.

Before I left Connaught House I had discovered the value of making myself look foolish on purpose, partly to amuse other people but also partly to suggest that my genuine mistakes might perhaps be deliberate. This was not enough to defend me when we were comparing our parents' banking arrangements, and I said I thought my mother banked with the Bank of England; the derision was hurtful.

It still feels worse making mistakes in areas where I am inexperienced than in areas where I excel.

I am, for example, no craftsman. I was in the cast of an amateur production of *Treasure Island*, and we were invited to help build the scenery. I spent one evening in the theatre by myself, sawing up some long pieces of two by four into roughly the right lengths to be combined with some metal scaffolding poles. The next day the more skilled carpenters arrived with their personal tool-kits and found that my pieces of wood didn't fit. They produced set-squares and rulers and found discrepancies and crooked sawing. They commented on the cost of the wood and the nuisance it would be to have to wait for new pieces. I felt a quite disproportionate shame. I understood exactly what was meant by the expression, 'I wished the earth would swallow me up.' Eventually, after some more measuring, they discovered that it was the scaffolding poles that were the wrong length, and not my slightly mis-measured pieces of wood. What interests me from an educational point of view is that my self-respect was restored, possibly deliberately, by the set-designer, who asked me to help to make a balustrade the next evening, and to space out the uprights without even measuring. All those set-squares and expandable rules that had so humiliated me had been entirely unnecessary.

When you are trying to help and you make a mistake, that is quite bad enough, but when someone assumes that you have been trying to hinder, that is doubly

distressing. It is a common situation when you are a young child. When I dropped that pile of plates at my prep-school I had been trying to help.

Adults don't reflect that discouraging children who are trying to help will put them off helping for ever. Parents are irritated by little children who get their clothes soaked when they are helping with the washing-up, or drop clean clothes off the line into the mud when they are helping to bring them indoors, or spread the dust all over the floor when they are helping to sweep it up. The children will stop helping and by the time they are adolescents their parents will be raging at them for the opposite reason.

When someone makes a mistake they need to be consoled and encouraged, not derided or rebuked. This applies just as much in learning as it does in social behaviour. If your failures are emphasised, you lose confidence and fall into the mood of despair that makes all learning impossible. When you have cut the wood wrong, you need to be invited to make the uprights for the balustrade without even measuring.

The worst consequence of the kind of education I endured was a lack of confidence in my own opinions, but because I was always something of an outcast, I never lost confidence in my own conscience. In many others of the same age I saw the approval of the group apparently become the basic moral criterion, rather than empathy or altruism. Groups tend to try to discredit empathy and altruism because they put concern for others before loyalty to the group. Because of this, those who accept the group's authority are obliged to deny their true nature.

Conformity on a superficial level was imposed on me by expectation, demand, threats, violence and ultimately by the fear of being different. I often avoid to conforming on purpose, but even so the fear of being different by mistake has stayed with me all my life.

As well as learning from my own experience, I have learnt from the experience of others. I always used to think that almost everyone else was happier at school than I was; I now believe that a conventional school environment hardly suits anybody. Lynette, for instance, was unhappy at school, in spite of being good at school work, outstanding in sport and head prefect. She recently attended a reunion where much of the conversation was about whether the girls had been happy. Very few admitted to having enjoyed school, but they found it hard to believe that Lynette had also been unhappy because, within conventional terms, she had been so successful.

The extraordinary cruelty of traditional education is so taken for granted that it takes someone with fresh eyes to recognise it. Children who have been home-educated often find it hard to believe what they see when they go into schools. The following account is by a Maria Kopta, a young Austrian who had been educated

entirely by her parents, in Austria and Turkey. When she was considering a career, she took a placement in a school.

When I went into the school for the first time, I had the feeling that I was breaking an oath. I had sworn to myself that never in my life would I enter a school. For me schools were nothing more than prisons for children. When I first decided to do a placement in this school, I didn't know whether it was the right decision. The first three days I could hardly bear to be there. I just concentrated on the children, but I simply could not get used to the school itself. I had never known an environment like it. The children had to sit for five hours a day in this kind of prison, and only go to the toilet when they had permission. I had often heard about schools, but this overshoot my worst imaginings. I talked to the teachers about it, but they said that this school had already made great progress in comparison with really conventional schools. . .

It is strange that one can earn money just by spending one's time with children. In the three months I was there I learnt a great deal about children. Now I know that I definitely want to work with children. However, my opinion about schools has not changed. I would like to go on working in a school but I would either help the children to escape or else destroy all the timetables.

When I left it was very sad for me and for the children.

I have now really found out what it means not to have been to school, but I have never before been so certain that I didn't miss anything.

(Edler, 1998, tr. Gribble)

I was sent to a boarding school when I was eight, but children who have the good fortune to stay at home with their parents have other discomforts. The noise you hear from primary school playgrounds, for instance, is not usually a happy sound. It is a kind of over-excited shrieking as if, in the brief twenty minutes of break time, the children are trying to make all the noise that has been suppressed during lessons.

In 1994 the World Wildlife Fund and a group called Learning Through Landscapes, devoted to making playgrounds into pleasanter places, published a book called *Special Places, Special People - The Hidden Curriculum of School Grounds*, by Wendy Titman. She had been researching children's attitudes to their own playgrounds, and found that one of the elements which conveyed messages and meanings to children was tarmac. Tarmac suggests a particular type of behaviour: hard surface = hard play. It hurts if you fall on it. It also implies territorial domination, because tarmac is often ball-playing territory, usually dominated by boys, and for some of the children who don't want to play football there is a degree of emotional pain resulting from their consequent exclusion, the way they are confined to spaces around the edge and have to accept inferior status and try to find other things to do.

Iona and Peter Opie, in *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, published in 1969, commented on the differences between the two kinds of games in their title.

We have noticed that when children are herded together in the playground, which is where the educationalists and the psychologists and the social scientists gather to observe them, their play is markedly more aggressive than when they are in the street or in the wild places. At school they play 'Ball He,' 'Dodge Ball', 'Chain Swing', and 'Bull in the Ring'. They indulge in duels such as 'Slappies', 'Knuckles', and 'Stinging', in which the pleasure, if not the purpose of the game is to dominate another player and inflict pain. In a playground it is impracticable to play the free-ranging games like 'Hide and Seek' and 'Relievo' and 'Kick the Can', that are, as Stevenson said, the 'well-spring of romance', and are natural to children in the wastelands.

Often, when we have asked children what games they played in the playground we have been told 'We just go round aggravating people.' Nine-year-old boys make-believe they are Black Riders and in a mob charge on the girls. They play 'Coshes' with knotted handkerchiefs, they snatch the girls' ties or hair ribbons and call it 'Strip Tease', they join hands in a line and rush round the playground shouting 'Anyone who gets in our way will get knocked over', they play 'Tweaking', running behind a person and tweaking the lobe of his ear as they run off. One teacher, who asked her own 6-year-old what game he really enjoyed at school, was surprised to find it was 'getting gangs on to people'. He said, 'We get in a line and slap our sides as we run, and push down or bump a child.'

Such behaviour would not be tolerated amongst the players in the street or the wasteland; and for a long time we had difficulty reconciling these accounts with the thoughtfulness and respect for the juvenile code that we had noticed in the quiet places.

Opie I. and Opie, P, 1969, pp. 13-14

The suffering in playgrounds is not deliberately organised, but within the school buildings there are plenty of examples of unnecessary suffering that are accepted or sometimes even deliberately imposed by the school authorities.

An obvious instance is imposed silence. Children are sometimes not allowed to talk in the corridors, or even to talk during school dinners.

School uniform is another form of humiliation. Like any other routine, it is usually accepted without question. Those who value it often associate it with pride in the school. It is supposed to disguise differences in wealth, because everyone has to wear the same. It saves time getting up in the morning, because you don't have to choose what to wear. It encourages a well-turned out appearance. It makes it easy to identify which school children come from if they are observed misbehaving in the street, and so discourages them from doing so.

Teachers, fully made-up and wearing their own elegant clothes and dangling earrings, forbid girls to wear cosmetics or jewellery. The message of this hypocrisy is clear – children are second-class citizens. And it is not enough to force them to submit to arbitrary authority in the school buildings, they must wear the badge of inferiority when they go out into the street.

Lavatories may also cause serious abuses. I know of a comprehensive school where, if anyone is caught smoking in a lavatory, all the lavatories in the whole school are locked for the rest of the day. In some schools, I am told, the lavatories are kept locked all the time. I have a young friend who was so disgusted by his school lavatories and so afraid of the older teenagers who hung around in there, that he never went to the lavatory at school at all during his first five years.

Joanna Gore, researching for her thesis in ethnography, spent three months in a London primary school. She joined in the life of the children as far as possible, so that she saw the school from their point of view. Her experiences are described in her book, *Leave me Alone*. During a coach trip to the sea-side the teachers decided that they did not want the children moving up and down the aisle, so they told them that the toilet at the back was out of order, and any child who was desperate must use a bucket at the front.

The school was considered comparatively liberal, and had, for example, no uniform, but here are some of the routine humiliations that she had to undergo when she was playing the role of a pupil:

It was illegal to leave the school between nine and three-thirty.

She often had to sit on the floor, while the adults talked over her head.

She had to obey rules that didn't apply to the teachers.

She was not allowed to speak unless she had her hand up.

Sometimes she and the class were given the instruction, 'Hands on heads, bottoms on the carpet, eyes on Janet.'

The staff had more comfortable chairs than she did.

Many doors between different parts of the school were kept locked, and only staff had the keys.

She had to ask for permission to go to the toilet.

If she had permission to be outside her class, she had to wear a blue plastic band on her arm.

The grass area in the playground was fenced off and out of bounds.

There was a list of approved punishments, including being made to stand by the wall, or being kept in during playtime.

Every morning all the children had to empty their pockets of money, toys, bus-passes and food, and the teacher would keep it all until the end of the day.

Joanna commented:

Imagine being forced by law to go every day to an institution where people make you stand in lines, sit on the floor and listen for hours to talk that is of no interest to you; where they restrict your movement, shout at you and punish you for speaking or being lively; where they take away your 'privileges' (freedom, clothes, belongings, etc.) for saying what you think. The fact that basic human rights are called 'privileges' when applied to children is telling in itself. In order to oppress children and to allow these atrocities to go on with a clear conscience, we adults must dehumanise children.

Gore, 2004, p. 6

What is shocking is that there is nothing unexpected or new here. We all know that school is like that. It is only when you see it all once again from the point of view of an adult consciously sharing the child's experience that you see the extent of deliberate humiliation that is involved. I did not read Joanna's book, and so fully understand this, until I was nearly seventy.

In British schools physical torture such as beating is no longer allowed, but imprisonment remains a standard feature of our education. Halewood Community Comprehensive School, for example, publishes its strategies to 'encourage good attendance'. Included in these strategies is, 'Close liaison with police' to ensure that 'no pupil misses school unnecessarily.' Anywhere in the country parents who do not succeed in forcing their children to go to school may face a fine or a jail sentence.

We read in the papers about children who have committed suicide because of bullying. Such cases are exceptional, but for every child who has actually committed suicide there must be thousands who are miserable. This is apparently accepted as inevitable. When some time ago there were three suicides within a year or so at Millfield, then the most expensive private school in the country, they were passed over almost unnoticed by the press.

Academic pressure, too, can cause desperate unhappiness, particularly among middle-class girls. Oliver James, in an article in the Observer on June 1, 2003, described the situation like this:-

There seems to have been an outbreak of perfectionism among affluent daughters. The perfectionist feels her best is never good enough. She sets impossibly high standards, rigidly imposed with a fanatical intolerance of mistakes. She has an intense fear of failure and is plagued by self-doubt. Even when she does achieve goals she feels

dissatisfied, focusing on what she got wrong or belittling her success. Her main concern is to do better than others rather than the pleasure, in itself, of carrying out a task. Her self-esteem relies on winning, whether at work or play.

Such girls are prone to depression, despite their outward success, and to obsessive thoughts. Charlotte says: 'If I do something less than perfectly I will think about it for a long time. It's petty, but in my mock GCSEs I got two As, and A-stars in the rest. One of the As was in maths and I cried for so long. It was my best subject and I didn't get the top.

Mary Macleod, chief executive of the National Family and Parenting Institute, has noticed the trend, and says that in the early summer exam hype is at such a pitch that some girls will find the stress too much and attempt to kill themselves.

When you consider how much can be learnt without teaching, and how little use we later make of much of what we were taught at school, it becomes plain that all this humiliation, bullying and academic pressure is unnecessary. There is no need for children to suffer so.

There are three main aspects to education. Arranged in order of rising importance these are the learning of facts, the acquiring of skills and the development of an attitude to the world.

The traditional approach to all three is to try to impose them. However, it is difficult to remember facts that do not interest you and do not link up coherently with your present knowledge: it is pointless to acquire skills that are never going to be of any use to you: an attitude to the world that has been learnt from instruction rather than from understanding and experience cannot become an essential part of your character.

At school I was forced to waste a great deal of time trying to learn facts that were of no significance to me. The dative plural of mensa is mensis. The tributaries of the river Severn are – I have forgotten. I don't know why our physics teacher blew bubbles in one lesson. I can't remember the name of the endless war amongst the German states, let alone what happened in it. I have forgotten all the house colours at Eton, including my own. I was "taught" all these things.

I learnt to read and write, and both skills immediately became important to me, but otherwise my practical education was a failure. I was no good at games. I learnt how to play the Eton field game and to row a rigger and play fives and do some military drill, but apart from sometimes playing fives at Repton I have done none of these things since leaving school. I had no encouragement in art, and was discouraged from doing music. The skills I have used, like touch-typing, driving and cooking I learnt later.

I developed the beginnings of an attitude to the world at school, but it was not so much the attitude that was being taught as a reaction against it. Religion, obedience and conformity have all played a part in my life, but I have come to see them all as potentially harmful. Empathy, affection, concern for others, humility and honesty have taken their place.

What matters to me most in my life is my family. It was not school that taught me to value my family. Nor was it at school that I learnt how to hold a baby, how to change a nappy, how to dress a small child. Nor was it at school that I learnt all those other things that now occupy most of my time. I learnt how to live my life in spite of school, not because of it. Nor was it at school that I learnt about the things that have given me happiness. I was happy when I was reading to my children by firelight. I have often been happy in the company of very young children for whom every dead leaf, every pebble is a source of fascination. I was happy at the International Democratic Education Conference at Sands in 1997, which was organised by two of the pupils; people came from all over the world and we talked about things that really mattered and we agreed. I often feel happy by the sea, or in the countryside, or when the beauty of familiar, every-day things suddenly strikes me. I have loved plays, and listening to music; I have loved writing and reading, and I have loved playing music in spite of the discouragement of my teachers. I have often entirely lost myself in concentrated thought, which is also happiness of a kind.

When I consider reasons for happiness in my adult life I remember love above all, a subject that does not appear on the school curriculum – it is indeed in a kind of negative curriculum, where it joins drugs and gambling and other taboos. Yet the two most important joys in life are love, and the freedom to be oneself.

I will not describe my experiences of love of particular people, which at different times has transformed the world for me, because I am writing about the development of ideas, not emotions, and besides, it is a private matter. I will say only that when Jenny died I felt that one third of what gave meaning to my life had been taken from me, but that I still had my children and my work. Now I have Lynette and our children and grandchildren.

Not everyone can expect to be so lucky, but everyone ought to be able to be free to be themselves. What happened to me is what happens to anyone else who has been brought up on traditional lines. The freedom to be myself, to behave naturally, began to be taken from me in early childhood and was withdrawn further and further by my schooling and by social expectations. I saw the same thing happening to the boys at Manor House, the little prep school where I taught for two terms before going up to Cambridge. I described it to myself then as the construction and reinforcement of a suit of papier-mâché armour. Every day the child dips more bits of paper in the glue and slaps them onto the outside, in order to gain a little more protection. I was surprised many years later to find that the psychologist Wilhelm

Reich, who had a great influence on A. S. Neill of Summerhill, had a similar theory about armouring.

One of the major joys of Dartington for me was the freedom to throw off my armour. As a boy at school I had had to play a part, as a member of the upper middle class I had had to play a part, as a teacher at Repton I had had to play a part, and then suddenly I discovered a world where I could be myself.

I found that the freedom to be oneself does not mean a rush of self-indulgence, that lack of external control does not, as conformists would expect, result in disorientation and excess. Lack of external control leaves room for exercising self-control. Freedom to be oneself grants the opportunity to recognise one's natural altruism, to ignore society's emphasis on status, competition and wealth and instead to value friendship, responsibility and enjoyment. To put it in the simplest terms, it gives us the chance to see that it is natural to be good when you are happy.

This is probably the most important lesson I have learnt in my life. The silly thing about it is that I knew it before I went to school, and then I had it steadily educated out of me. It has taken me years to learn it all over again.

And as to schools, I have come to this conclusion:

There is obviously a line between good and evil. If, as I believe, evil is all that tends to diminish joy or increase suffering, and good is all that tends to diminish suffering or increase joy, then traditional schools, however well-intentioned they may be, fall on the wrong side of the line.

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